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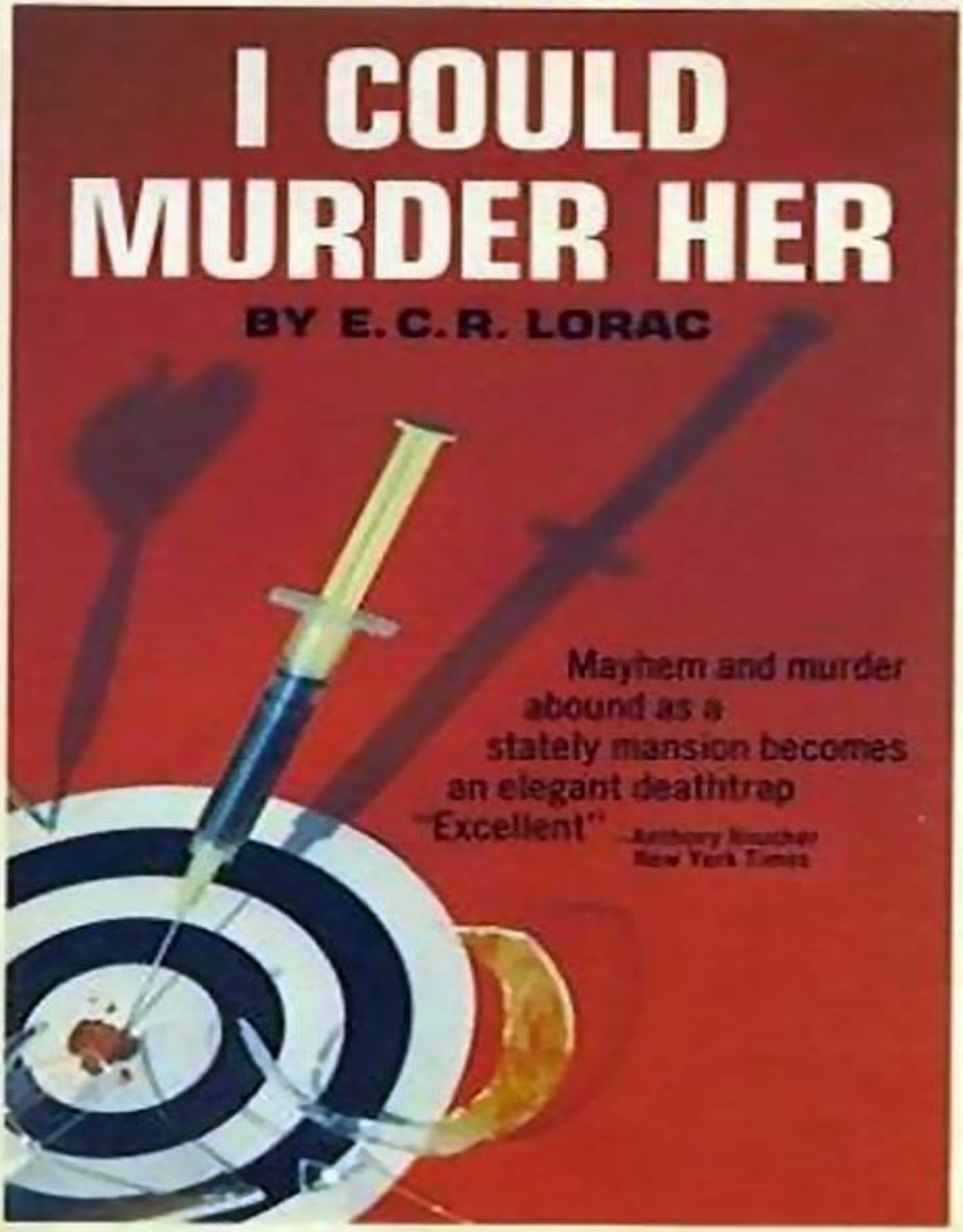
A DOUBLEDAY CRIME CLUB® SELECTION

I COULD MURDER HER

BY E. C. R. LORAC



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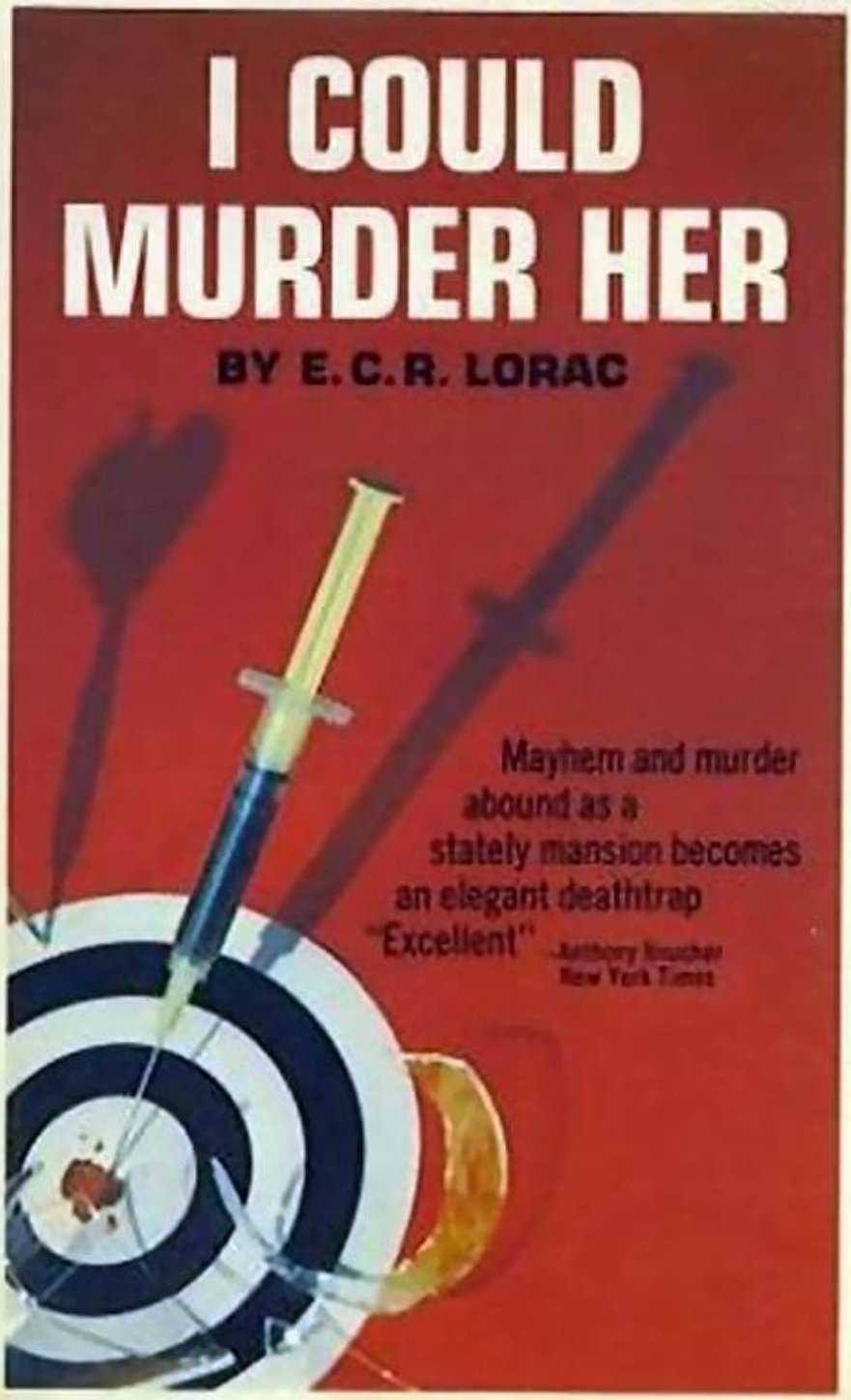

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I Could Murder Her

by E.C.R. Lorac

An Inspector Robert MacDonald Mystery
Book 34

Doubleday & Company • New York
1951

“INGENIOUS AND DISTINGUISHED”

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A DOUBLEDAY CRIME CLUB® SELECTION

MY FAVORITE VICTIM

Muriel Farrington deserved to die. She was a domineering, selfish old woman who smashed lives the way other people kill flies. Everyone talked about doing her in but no one dared—with one notable exception.

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I COULD MURDER HER

BY E. C. R. LORAC

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ONE

ANNE STRANGE STOOD IN THE MIDDLE of the great Regency drawing room, looking around her and trying for the hundredth time to appreciate her own good fortune. It was a beautiful room, beautiful in its proportions, its gracefully panelled walls, and its long windows with their view of Regent's Park across the road. The room was furnished, too, with pieces of its own period, fine rosewood and mellow mahogany fashioned by craftsmen who followed the great traditions of Sheraton and Chippendale. To have such a living room (and other rooms almost equally beautiful, in postwar London was a good fortune accorded to few. Anne knew all about the "prefabs," the "pathological flatlets," and the "positive pigsties" in which the majority of young married people lived today: she often made a genuine effort to be grateful for her own living conditions, but below that dutiful effort there smouldered a dull resentment. "If only Tony could realise my point of view," she said to herself. "After all, he's *my* husband and he only seems able to remember that he's *her* son. Oh, these jokes about mothers-in-law . . . Little did I know when I came here. It's not my home. It's hers."

She shook herself impatiently, angry that she had allowed the same old theme to dominate her again. Today was to he a good day, for Veronica Lacey was coming to spend the afternoon. Good old Ronnie—what fun they'd had together in the Services. Ronnie was utterly remote from all this tangle of family tug o' war, this fighting for one's gaiety and liberty against a woman who had the muffling quality of an anaesthetic.

Anne looked round the room to see that "bits of herself" were in evidence. It was Anne who had planted the bowls of narcissus and Roman hyacinths which looked so charming on the polished tables; it was she who had arranged the tall-stemmed chrysanthemums and put up the Van Gogh print over the mantelpiece to remind herself that *she* hadn't become a "genuine antique." And the Degas Ballet Girls—so reminiscent of Paula, with her lovely legs and inscrutable eyes. "Oh, damn Paula! She's part and

parcel of all this thing," said Anne. "I'll get rid of that Degas print. But Ronnie will like the bulbs. She's rather like a spring flower herself. And she's outside all this. Glory, it'll be nice to see her. She's the only visitor of my own I've asked for ages . . .

2

Of course Ronnie exclaimed, "Oh, Anne, aren't you lucky!" when she saw the lovely sitting room, and her eves looked very round—and very young. Anne laughed. "Am I?" she asked. "Ronnie, you make me feel so old. You look such an infant."

"Me? Oh, I know I look a rag bag. I'm just too busy to care, Anne. If you could only see the way Tom and I pig it in our foul Hat, you'd have a fit. This is so gloriously serene and dignified. You were always a fortunate wench. I do envy you."

"You needn't," said Anne. "I envy you your foul flat. It's yours. This isn't mine, It isn't all beer and skittles living with in-laws, you know."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't got any," said Veronica, sitting herself down in a brocade-covered armchair, facing the long windows so that she could see the entrancing beauty of the bare plane trees across the road. "Tom's parents were killed in the blitz and his only sister is out in Malaya. We're frightfully poor, Anne. It was all right when I had a job, but when Thomas the second arrived, expenses went up and income went down, and I do like nice things—so when I saw' all this I just coveted. It must be so marvellous to have so much space."

"I'm a selfish pig, Ronnie," said Anne quickly. "I do realise you have a tough time—"

"Oh, I'm not grumbling," said Veronica quickly. "I adore my brat, and I'm quite domestic-minded, and I'm lucky in having a good 'sitter-in' who obliges occasionally. It was just seeing these lovely rooms and the sort of dignity of this house—it made me realise what a muck I live in, with

nappies festooned round the sitting-room fire and all that.' "I know," said Anne quickly, and then broke off as a quiet knock sounded at the door.

“Are you at home, dear?” asked a gentle voice, and the door opened to admit a grey-haired lady. “I beg your pardon darling,” said the newcomer quickly. “I hadn’t realised that you had a visitor. Oh, *please* don't get up. . . .”

“May I introduce Mrs. Coniston to you?” said Anne. “Veronica, this is my mother-in-law, Mrs. Farrington.”

“How do you do? This is a very great pleasure,” murmured the elderly lady, advancing to shake-hands with Veronica “I’m sure I have heard Anne speak of you—Ronnie Lace; that was, surely? I think I met your mother at one time Dear child, do sit down. How[r] tired you look.”

“She means what a mess I look,” thought Veronica, conscious of the older woman’s quiet elegance. The beautiful cut black frock, the pearls, the diamonds on well-tended hands, the soignée head with its expertly dressed silver hand commanded the old-fashioned word “elegance,” for Mrs Farrington was old-fashioned herself in a way that seemed to rebuke as stridency the modern mode of lipstick, nail varnish, and urchin cut. She had a beautiful voice, low and charmingly modulated, and she moved gracefully, for all that her back was held very straight and her head erect.

“Ronnie’s got a baby, and she does all the housework as well, so I expect she does get tired,” said Anne. “I was hoping she’d put her feet up and have a real laze.”

“An excellent idea!” said Mrs. Farrington warmly. “How lovely to have a baby. You must let me come and see him— or it is her?—sometime. I love all babies. I should beg Anne to bring you down to tea with me, child, only I realise it’s more restful for you up here.”

“It's such a lovely room,” sighed Veronica. “It does me good even to see it. So few people seem to have beautiful homes these days.”

“But how delightful to meet a modern girl who cares for beautiful homes,” said Mrs. Farrington. “I get so disheartened when the young things of today dismiss our beloved old pieces as junk, but I’m afraid I belong to the junk category myself. Now the last thing I want to do is to interrupt your visit. I know that you and Anne must have so much to talk about, you were in the Forces together, were you not? Anne, dear, I just wanted to give you this little parcel. It’s only some cork mats to put underneath those bowls of bulbs. I love growing bulbs, but if you aren’t very careful the bowls do mark the polished tables, and it seems such a pity to let that

happen. I'll leave them here, dear, and you can put them under the bowls later. I know you won't forget " She turned to Veronica. "Have a good rest, child, and I do hope you will find time to come to tea with me another day. It would give me so much pleasure, and of course I should love you to bring baby. Don't get up, dear child. Good-bye for now."

3

"I see," said Veronica.

"I wonder if you do?" said Anne. "It's much more complex than you can imagine; but you don't want to hear about my complexities. Put your feet up and have a cigarette, and tell me if you've seen any of the old gang lately."

"I haven't seen anybody, there just isn't time, and I'm ashamed of looking such a rag bag," said Veronica, putting her feet up on the pouf which Anne provided. "Goodness, how lovely to put the old legs up!" went on Veronica. "But, Anne, do tell me about things here. I'm so frightfully interested, and it'll be such a comfort to hear about somebody else's problems; it'll help me to forget my own moans—or does that sound frightfully mean?"

"No, of course it doesn't. If you want to hear about this crazy house, I shall adore to tell you about it. I don't risk confidences with most people, they have a way of getting back to ma-in-law, and then there's hell to pay. One thing about you and me, there's no need to be afraid either of us will pass anything on. We do know one another." Veronica nodded. "Yes. That's why I was so glad you routed me out. I thought you'd done with me for keeps." "Well, I hadn't. I was hoping that Tony and I could get out of this place and then we could have asked you to my own foul flat or whatever it was. I hate asking people here. That old devil always gets at my friends. You wait. She *will* ask you to tea, 'and *do* bring baby,' and then she'll tell you, oh, so gently and persuasively, just how ungrateful and unkind I am."

"But, Anne, if it's like that, why don't you just walk out?" "Because I've got a husband, and I don't really want to walk out on *him*, although it may come to it," said Anne. "You see, this place suits Tony. He's always

been used to it, and he likes being comfortable and secure and peaceful, and he thinks I'm just being awkward."

"Then you've been here ever since 1946?"

Anne nodded. "Yes. We got married before Tony was demobilised. At first I lived in an hotel, and thought I could find a flat or a small house, but it was frightfully difficult, and we hadn't much money. Then the Farringtons moved back here. The house was commandeered during the war and the furniture stored, and they didn't move back until 1946. Tony and I hadn't managed to find a home of our own, and then I was ill, I started a baby and had a sideslip, and Ma Farrington came fussing along, simply oozing sympathy and helpfulness, and said: 'Come along to us. The house is *much* too big for us now, and you can have the whole first floor all to yourselves and be quite self-contained, and it's ready furnished, and Madge will manage the catering until you're really strong, dear.' And it all sounded utterly marvellous. Tony was fed up with living in digs, and I was still a bit of a flop, and so w[r]e came here, and here we've stayed."

Veronica nodded. "I see. It just happened. Is it only you and Mr. and Mrs. Farrington here?"

"Oh, lord, no. It's complicated beyond words. The house is bungfull. Do you really want to hear about all the inlaws?"

"I want to hear all about everything. Why is Tony's name Strange when his mother's named Farrington?"

Anne laughed. "Take a deep breath, love, and get a good hold on yourself before I plunge in. Mrs. Farrington was first married in 1912 to a Captain Strange. Tony is their only child. In 1914 Captain Strange was killed, in the retreat from Mons. In 1915 his widow met Captain Farrington, who'd just lost his own wife, and who had a baby girl, Madge. Well, I suppose it seemed like providence all round. Captain Farrington married Muriel Strange, who had a nice iittle fortune of her own, plus this house, and she took Baby Madge into her loving arms and consoled bereaved widower simultaneously." Veronica laughed. ''Well, it sounds quite sensible, and it must have worked, seeing they've lived together ever since." "Oh, yes, it worked very well. Old Eddie—my father-in-law—is the most amiable and accommodating old boy you ever met. He's quite a peach and I really do love him. After the 1914-1918 to-do, he got a job as Appeal Secretary to one of the ex-Servicemen's Associations, and it suited him

beautifully to have a lovely home and a dignified wife who was a very good mother to the growing family." "How many children did they have?"

"They started off with the two, Tony, who was Muriel Strange's son, and Madge, who was Eddie Farrington's daughter by his first wife. Then they produced Joyce, and finally the twins—Peter and Paula, poor lambs. The twins were a sort of afterthought, or else never intended. They weren't born until 1930, when Tony was sixteen and Joyce was eight."

"Five of them—quite a quiverful," murmured Veronica. "And do they all still live here?"

"Yes, love, all of them. Joyce is married to Philip Duncan. They also have a flat here. So this commodious residence houses three married couples—Pa and Ma Farrington, Tony and me, and Joyce and Philip. Plus Madge, who was trained as a hospital nurse and who runs the house for dear mother, and the twins, who are as mad as hatters and inhabit the attics. And there you have it."

Veronica's eyes had been getting rounder and rounder. "Glory! What a houseful! And how does it work? Do you all eat together, as in a high-class catering establishment, or what?"

"What, love. When Tony and I first came, before Joyce got married, we all had meals together in the family dining room, *very* ceremonious and punctual and all that. Madge did the catering, and she did it jolly well, although she's an outsize in snakes. Then, when I realised I couldn't winkle Tony out of here in a hurry, I struck. I said if I couldn't have my own home, at least I'd have my own kitchen and my own meals. I hoped Mrs. F. would blankly refuse to have her small boudoir turned into a kitchen, but she didn't. She knows just how far she can go, and she realised at that time that if I really did walk out, Tony would come too. You see, she worships Tony. She's always owned him. She's like that. The only reason we were able to get married was that we were both in the Services and got married by Special Licence just before Tony went overseas. She couldn't stop us, but she had the time-honoured heart attacks and all that. Of course, when I agreed to come and live here, I hadn't the first idea what main-law was like. It took me quite a while to learn."

"But, Anne, if you feel like that about it, doesn't Tony understand?"

"No. He doesn't. I told you it was complex, Ronnie. Tony has always been devoted to his mother: he says she has been a marvellous mother, and

it’s true. She loves him with a devouring love that’s almost terrifying. If she can only get his socks to mend she’s blissfully happy. I’m very fond of Tony, and I intend to keep him, but I know all his little ways. He *likes* being mothered. He’s lazy so far as his home is concerned, and he likes things to run smoothly and to find everything comfortable and dignified when he gets home after a hard day’s work. I can see his point of view.”

“And he can’t see yours?”

“No. He can’t—or won’t. It’s inconceivable to him that I should criticise his mother or find her difficult. He says she’s always so courteous and considerate and unselfish; and her health is so frail that it’s only right to give her the only happiness she asks for, having her dear children around her.”

“Cripes,” said Veronica. “It’s just beyond me. Tom and I have only each other-”

“And the foul fiat,” put in Anne. “Give me a foul flat every time. I shall achieve it one day. I just won’t be beat, but I think patience :s more likely to win than high strikes. Now I’m going to get you some tea, and you just stay put and study the lovely room.”

“It *is* lovely, Anne.”

“I know it is, love, but I’d still prefer a utility suite. I’ve had enough of antiques and how to care for them.”

Veronica laughed. “If it were me, I believe I’d bash it all to blazes, just out of temper.”

“I’ve thought of that, but it wouldn’t get me anywhere,” replied Anne.

4

“Oh, don’t go yet,” begged Anne. “I want you to see Eddie—pa-in-law, you know. He’s a darling, and you’ll love him, Ronnie. He always comes in and sees me after tea.”

“Is he still an Appeal Secretary?”

“Oh, lord, no; he retired in 1938. Then from 1939 to 1940 he raged round trying to enlist in something and at last got tagged on to the Pioneers, training a marvellous selection of toughs and ex-C.O.s. I believe he had a

glorious time and enjoyed it no end. Then in 1945 he was retired and had to come home, very hard up and frightfully bored, because he's still got any amount of energy and character."

"Why very hard up?" inquired Veronica.

"Well, he's got hardly any money of his own, and he's a very independent-minded person. It's Mrs. Farrington who has the money: she owns the house, and of course she takes the rent Philip and Tony pay. She's as mean as what not. Anyway, Eddie never has a bean to spend on himself, although his wife still makes him change into a dinner jacket every evening. This *is* a marvellous house, Ronnie. It just beats the band. Oh, there he is! Come in, Eddie. I want you to see Ronnie."

The elderly gentleman who came across the room smiling at Veronica was what the latter described as "a dear old boy." He was still very erect, thin and whipcordy in figure, with silver hair and merry blue eyes.

"My father-in-law, Colonel Farrington," said Anne. "Mrs. Coniston, otherwise Ronnie."

"Delighted," murmured the Colonel; "but I feel a gatecrasher. Anne and I always have a date after tea, but it's an understood thing that visitors have precedence. It's all too easy to get into bad habits in a house like this."

"You're not gate-crashing, Eddie." said Anne. "I invited you. Now we're all going to have a quick one while the going's good."

"Ah . . . that reminds me. A little present," murmured the Colonel, producing a flat bottle from his pocket. "Scotch, my dear. I won it. A: darts."

"But how clever of you," put in Veronica. "D'you think I could play darts? Think how Tom's eyes would shine if I won prizes like that."

"At the club?" asked Anne, laughing across at the old man. "Tell Ronnie about the club: she'll love it, and she's the world's safest confidante."

"Your very good health, young lady," said the Colonel, raising the glass Anne had handed to him. "My club? Well, it's quite a story. When I left the Army I felt I must have something to occupy me, a man can't hang around the house all day, and the money ran away too fast when I went to my club in St. James's. So I got hold of an allotment, across the park there, towards Camden Town. Always wanted to be a gardener. Something very

satisfying about gardening. Thirsty work, though, and gives you an appetite. So on the advice of a fellow allotment holder, I went to a pub—The Cow with the Crumpled Horn. A very good pub, too. I got interested in some of the fellows there. Very good chaps. Very lively conversations we have. They've got a Darts Club and I've worked my way up. I'm on the committee now, and proud of it."

"And when Eddie's out, as he often is, all he needs to say is 'The Club, my dear,' " chuckled Anne, "and it's all so simple."

Colonel Farrington laughed. "It's like this," he said. "My wife's an old-fashioned woman. That isn't a criticism. I respect her for it. She's only experienced one stratum of society, one sort of life, the life she was brought up to, bless her. Now, during the last few years—'39 to '45, that is—I saw a different aspect of things. Got to know some very nice chaps and got interested in their point of view. As I've grown older I've begun to take an interest in all sorts and conditions of men, but my wife wouldn't see my point. So I don't tell her. Anne, here—well, she understands me and I understand her, and we have our private jokes. My club is one. See the idea?"

"Yes, rather. I think it's a jolly idea, too," said Veronica. "Tell me about some of the other members."

"All sorts, all sorts," chuckled the Colonel. "Railway men, vanmen, bus drivers, tradesmen, a house painter and a portrait painter, a lawyer and a communist. We have a regular debating evening now. Very enlightening. Much more interesting than St. James's. I've learnt a lot this past year, learned how other chaps live, and what they really think of blokes like me."

"I think it's amazing that you've got such an open mind," said Veronica. "In my experience, real army men can never see any point of view but their own."

"I was lucky," said the Colonel simply. "I had some of the crust rubbed off me in the Pioneers. We weren't all regulars by a long chalk, and the spit and polish didn't matter so much; but those chaps worked, by gad, they worked. But I've been doing all the talking. Tell me a bit about yourself." "My husband's an architect, and we've an infant of eighteen months. We live in a poky little flat off Baker Street and we're pretty hard up and awfully happy. I think that's about all. I don't often get a chance to leave the chores for a few hours, and it's been grand seeing Anne again. I do agree

with you about one thing—seeing the way other people live is enormously interesting."

The Colonel nodded his white head. "It's been an eye opener to me," he said. "I've lived in this house for thirty years. I was brought up in an Oxfordshire manor house. During the past twelve months I've seen some of the slums in Camden Town, and I've been entertained to supper in a prefab. Makes you think. Some people have too much room, some have too little, but you never know' where you'll find a home—a real home, with all the word implies. That prefab was a home, by gad, it was."

"And I've no doubt what Ronnie calls her foul flat is home, too." said Anne.

Veronica laughed. "It's two and a half rooms, mostly festooned with infant's necessaries"—she laughed—"but come and see me there one day. I should love to have you."

"I will indeed," said Colonel Farrington.

"And now I must rush home and get Tom's supper," said Veronica. "It's been such fun coming. I've loved it, Anne." When Anne took her guest to "powder her nose" before leaving, Veronica said: "Eddie's a peach, Anne. I simply love him"

"Yes. He's a dear. He's the bright spot in this house, and I shall be sorry to leave him, because I know he'll miss me. He and I have such a lot of fun, and he's an astonishing old boy. He really enjoys his low-life acquaintances, and yet he never gets impatient with his wife. He's amazingly tolerant, because she . . . Oh, never mind. I mustn't harp."

Veronica laughed. "Hasn't she a weak heart—or something?"

"Oh, Ronnie, don't say things like that," groaned Anne. "She has got a weak heart, or pretends she has. It's one of the things I dare not think about."

Veronica looked at her in consternation. "Anne, darling— I'm sorry. You ought to get away from here if you feel like that. It's just too grim."

"Hoping? You're telling me, Ronnie. But I *will* find somewhere to live, somehow, or else I'll just beat it."

"I should beat it," said Veronica. "Tony would follow after, wouldn't he?"

"I just don't know, Veronica. But I'll risk it. This isn't any good."

“No. It just isn’t any good,” agreed Veronica.

TWO

“I’VE BEEN THINKING, MADGE, DARLING. About my birthday.”

Mrs. Farrington walked into the great basement kitchen of Windermere House. Madge Farrington, immaculate in a freshly laundered white coat, was making pastry at the scrubbed kitchen table. Around her were pastry board, flour bin, and rolling pin, and condiments and enamelled tins were arranged in neat and shining array, as pretty as a still-life picture. Madge had strong white hands and shapely arms, and she continued rubbing the fat and flour together in a shining basin as she replied dutifully: “Yes, Mother?” “I always have a little celebration, darling. Eddie was suggesting dining out and going on to a theatre, but I’m afraid it would be too much for me. I find restaurants so exhausting these days. The noise and smoking are too tiring for me, and as for theatres—well, I must face it. I don’t suppose I shall ever see a theatre again.”

She sighed heavily and wiped a tear away, while Madge went on with her pastry, efficient and unhurried. Seen thus, with eyes lowered over her work, Madge was not unprepossessing. She had thick dark hair, cut to a neat shingle bob, a very white skin, and regular features. It was her eyes which spoilt her looks. They were set too close together, and were reminiscent of boot buttons with their dark half-lustre.

Mrs. Farrington raised her head and straightened her back. “But I mustn’t worry you with my little troubles, Madgie. I’ve had such a happy life, and you have been so good to me. Don’t think I ever forget it, darling, and when I’m gone you’ll be quite independent. Now, about my birthday. I thought of a little dinner: Tony and Anne, Joyce and Philip, and perhaps that nice child who came to tea with Anne, Veronica Coniston, and her husband.”

“Did you mean to have dinner here. Mother?”

“Why, yes, darling. I told you that I find restaurants too exhausting. It's not that I‘m thinking of myself, I’m the last woman to do that, but if I turn faint or giddy, it spoils the evening for the others.”

“You are suggesting having a dinner party for eight, Mother. You know I have no help in the evenings: daily helps simply refuse to do evening work.”

“Darling, I’m *so* sorry. Won’t that nice Mrs. Pinks make an exception for my birthday? Would it be any good if I asked her?”

“No. It would be no good at all, Mother. Mrs. Pinks has a sick husband and four young children to look after, and she has no patience with people who expect late dinner. She works hard for me in the mornings and I don’t want to lose her. She’ll leave at once if you ask her to do evening work as well.”

“Oh, dear, how tiresome,” murmured Mrs. Farrington. “I can’t think what has come over all these women. Couldn’t you get a parlourmaid, Madgie? 1 always had such good servants in the old days.”

“If you want a good parlourmaid you’ll have to -pay her three pounds a week, and then you’ll have to get a housemaid to keep her company at the same wages plus insurance,” said Madge evenly.

“Really, it’s iniquitous,” sighed Mrs, Farrington. “But just for the one evening, Madgie, for my birthday. Could you manage if I helped with laying the dinner, and perhaps Paula could help you dish up?”

“I had Paula in the kitchen once, and that was once too often,” said Madge. “I’ve no doubt she is a very good dancer, but at domestic work she is no better than a mental defective. I’m sorry, Mother, but the worm turns eventually. I will not cook and serve dinner for eight singlehanded.”

Madge kept her voice low by a conscious effort, but even so there was an edge to it, a quiver which told of inner tension. Mrs. Farrington looked at her with well-expressed astonishment.

“But, Madgie, how unlike you! You have always been such a dear unselfish girl. I have always thought of you as my chief blessing, darling.”

Madge turned the pastry out onto her board and took up the rolling pin, thankful to have something to occupy her hands. Strangely enough, Madge was frightened of Mrs. Farrington, and it took her courage to say what she was determined to say.

“I think one can go on being unselfish for too long, Mother. When the war started and I went to train in hospital I was twenty-five. Now I’m

thirty-six. For eleven years I have worked like a drudge and had no life of my own. I think it's time I had a sample of living."

"Darling, what *do* you mean? Are you not well, Madgie? How dreadful of me not to have realised it. I will phone Dr. Baring-"

"Please don't do anything of the kind, Mother. I am perfectly well. I have been thinking things over for a long time, and I think it's better for me to say quite plainly what I have in mind."

"Very well, dear. I am listening," replied Mrs. Farrington. Her voice was subtly different: still beautifully pitched, still gentle, but with an undertone that was ominous to her stepdaughter's ears. Madge rolled out her pastry dexterously as she talked.

"I worked hard in hospital, Mother. All nurses worked hard during the war, and eventually I crocked up. I admit it. It was the buzz bombs which finished me. . . . Anyway, after I'd had the nursing-home treatment and you came back here, I was very glad to run the house and cook for you. I enjoyed the peacefulness of working by myself in this kitchen after all the moil and toil and bitterness of hospital."

"Yes, darling," put in Mrs. Farrington gently. "I remember how happy and contented you seemed, and I was happy, too, to see you well—and normal—again, after those dreadful days. I suffered for you. my little Madge."

"That's all past history," said Madge tersely. "I've been perfectly well ever since. The point is this: am I going to spend the rest of my life in a basement kitchen, running this house with inadequate help, and never getting anywhere?"

"But, Madgie, this is your home. *Our* home. We have been so proud of it. And surely with Anne and Joyce doing the work of their own flats, it can't be so very hard?"

Madge slipped her pastry over the fruit in the pie dish and began to crimp the edges of her pie. "Between us, Mrs. Pinks and I clean this basement; we do your bedroom, my bedroom, the twins' bedrooms, seventy stairs and five landings, the dining room and drawing room, and the outside steps and brass. And I cook as well. I don't think you would find another pair of women who would do as much."

"Of course not, darling! I know how wonderful you are. I always tell everybody how proud I am of you, and if I haven't realised that you are

finding it too much of a strain, it's because I've had so much trouble from this silly old heart of mine. I'm very glad we've had this talk, Madgie. I will see about getting some mere help for you, another daily woman. Or do you think one of those partially disabled men would be any good? Your father was suggesting getting one of them. I'll tell him to see about it."

Madge was twisting thin strips of dough into an elaborate decoration around the pie.

"That is for you to decide, Mother," she said. "So far as I'm concerned, it makes no difference. I've decided I can't go on here any longer."

She spoke abruptly, almost harshly, because it had been such an effort to get the words out, and Mrs. Farrington gave a little cry of distress.

"But, Madge, darling, we've been into all this before. . . . I'm sorry, dear, but could you get me a glass of water? I'll take one of my pills. I hate to worry you, but I find altercations so exhausting."

Madge leaned across and put a firm hand on her stepmother's wrist, feeling the pulse. "It's all right, Mother. Your pulse is quite good. I'll get you a glass of water, but you have no need to feel nervous about your heart. It's perfectly normal."

She went and fetched the glass of water, adding: "I will make your Ovaltine as soon as I've got this pie in the oven. You were saying we had been into all this before. That's not quite accurate. You see, I have been offered a job, rather a good job. I am going to America as nurse and travelling companion to an elderly lady."

Mrs. Farrington set the glass down on the table and looked at Madge very directly.

"I am sorry, Madge, darling. You should have consulted me about this before. You see, dear, it's quite impossible."

"Is it?" asked Madge. "Why?"

Mrs. Farrington sighed. "Darling, I know you've forgotten. It's right and natural that you should forget, poor child. But when you had that breakdown, you were *very* ill. Not physical illness, but mental. It was an agonising time for me. I can hardly bear to think of it, and of course you made a marvellous recovery. But the doctors warned me, darling. You must lead a very quiet life, with no excitements or emotional disturbances. For

you to go to America in charge of an invalid is quite out of the question. It couldn't be allowed."

"You mean you would try to stop me going?" asked Madge. Her breath was coming quickly now, and a pulse was beating in her temple.

"Darling, I shouldn't *try* to stop you. I *should* stop you. It would be my duty to do so. I should have to see Dr. Baring about it. My dear little Madge, put all this out of your head.

If you had only confided in me, I could have saved you so much distress. You see, dear, no doctor would sign the necessary papers for your entry permit to the States."

Madge lifted her pie carefully and put it in the oven. Then she came back to the kitchen table and began to shape the fragments of the dough into tiny tarts.

"Let us get this quite clear," she said. "Are you suggesting that I am insane because I had a nervous breakdown five years ago?"

Mrs. Farrington gave a little wail of protest. "Darling, never say things like that. It hurts me too terribly. And it shows how easily you are upset, how you lose your normal judgment in moments of stress. It's just that you're not strong enough, darling."

Madge stood very still, leaning on the scrubbed table. "Mother, if you prevent me going to America, you will be very sorry. I'm not going to say any more now, and it would be better for you to say nothing else. Only understand this. You are not going to stop me doing what I want to do this time. Now I will make your Ovaltine and I suggest you should go and have a rest."

As she spoke, the kitchen door opened and Colonel Farrington came in. "By Jove, Madge, you look a picture when you're cooking—neat as a daisy. And the kitchen always looks so jolly. Sorry to bother you when you're busy, my dear, but could you find me a drop of that cleaning fluid—always forget its name. I'm getting a grubby old man, dropping food down my waistcoat."

"Of course, Father. If you wait half a minute, I'll do it for you," replied Madge. "I just want to make Mother's Ovaltine."

"I do not want any Ovaltine, dear. Eddie, I'm afraid you will have to help me up to my room. I'm sorry, dear, but I can't manage the stairs

alone."

"Muriel, my dear, whatever has upset you? You look exhausted. Let me get you some brandy," exclaimed the Colonel in consternation.

"No. Just your arm, dear. I am a little upset. It is foolish of me, of course, but we won't talk about it. And you might phone old Dr. Baring. Now don't fuss, Eddie. I shall be quite all right. Just your arm around me, dear—and very slowly, please."

2

When Mrs. Farrington had been convoyed out of the kitchen by her husband. Madge slumped down on a kitchen chair and tried to control the shivering fit which took hold of her. Then the scullery door opened and Mrs. Pinks came in.

"Well, miss, seeing I was in there, I couldn't help hearing all that. Now don't you take on. Your ma's plain wicked. I've known it for a long time, and this last lot puts the lid on it. It was as much as I could do not to butt in and tell 'er off, you 'ipocritical old 'umbug, I thought. Now I'm going to make you a nice cup o' tea and a drop of you-know-what in it. You needs it."

Madge laughed shakily. "You are a dear, Mrs. Pinks. It *was* a bit shattering: she as good as told me I was certifiable."

"Now don't you bother about what the old 'orror said," said Mrs. Pinks as she put the kettle on the stove. "If anyone's bats, it's 'erself, and I'd tell 'er so for two pins. And selfish! Eight to dinner, if you please. It's time you got out of this, miss. She's just eating your life up. I'll be sorry for meself when you go, miss, you've been real good to me, but the sooner you does go, the better for you. I'd like to get my hands on her, I tell you straight."

Madge shivered. "Don't say things like that," she said. "The awful thing is she frightens me. She always has. When I was tiny I was terrified of her, and it comes back. But it's silly to talk about things."

"That it isn't," said Mrs. Pinks trenchantly. "It'll do you a power of good to talk, miss. I know I'm not much, but I'm fond of you, and you can say what you like to me, same's I did to you over my own bit of trouble.

You just listened and understood, and it helped me a lot. I reckon that old woman bullied you cruel as a kid."

Madge nodded. "That's true. You see, I wasn't her child. She adored Tony, and he was always good and I was always bad, and I was hideously jealous of him. I wanted someone to be fond of me, and I knew she wasn't, even when I was quite tiny, though she pretended to be, like she does now. She dominated me. Do you know that until I went to train as a nurse I'd never been away from her? She called me her darling Madgie and I'd always got to be at home with her to help her."

"I know. There is some women like that. As though they'd got tentacles," said Mrs. Pinks. "What beats me is why you ever came back here to slave for her."

"I had a bad breakdown. That's what she was talking about. You see, 1 was m a mental home for six months, and I had to come back here afterwards. I'd no money and I couldn't go on nursing. Nobody would have me until the doctors were certain I was all right again."

"If you'd 'ad an 'aporth o' sense, you'd have gone out charring sooner than come back 'ere to be put upon," said Mrs. Pinks. "But don't you worry about 'as-beens, dearie. You just beat it and go away like you said. D'you know, I could 'ardly contain meself while I was listening out there in the scullery in case you went and told 'er the name o' the party you're going with. If you'd started doing that, I'd've come in and been took queer meself just to stop you. While she don't know she can't make trouble, see? And now I'll just make that tea. And remember to tip me the wink when you're going, because I'll walk out on 'er, too, and then she can see for 'erself what nice light work you and me's been doing, and 'ave 'er eight to late dinner, I don't think." She gave a cheerful snort, adding: "And I'll just pour that Ovaltine down the sink while I'm about it, to ease me feelings. And I'll put a nice drop of that there in your tea—whisky's just what you're wanting. You're all of a jelly after that set-to. And if you take my advice, you'll pop your hat and coat on and walk out of that basement door with what's left of the 'ousekeeping money. You've earned it, if ever a girl did."

Madge began to laugh, and at that moment her father came into the kitchen again. "I seem to keep on hindering you this morning, my dear," he began apologetically, and Madge said quickly:

“You never hinder me, Daddy. I’m always glad to see you. Give me that waistcoat, I’ll soon get the mark off. Mrs. Pinks is just making a cup of tea. Will you have a cup?”

“With a drop of something in it for Miss Madge, which she badly needs, her all of a jelly with the things that’s been said.” said Mrs. Pinks truculently.

“By Jove, that’s a good idea!” said the Colonel. “I’m very grateful to you for looking after my daughter, Mrs. Pinks. I know she has a tough time here, and so do you, with all those stairs to clean. I’ve often said the bloke who designed this house was demented. Simply made work for the sake of making it. You’ll find they’re more rational over domestic interiors when you go the States, Madge.”

He took off his coat and waistcoat and handed the latter to Madge, while Mrs. Pinks poured out the tea.

“You know what Mother says about it?” asked Madge bitterly.

“Yes, yes, but don’t you bother, my dear,” replied Colonel Farrington. “You must know, with your training, that a weak heart often makes people difficult. I’ll have a word with old Baring myself. Muriel needs a sedative; she’s very highly strung, and the heart trouble makes her unreasonable sometimes. Don’t you worry about what she said. She’s got a heart of gold: she’ll understand your point of View as soon as she gets over this little bit of heart pain. False angina, Baring calls it; very painful, I believe.”

“Dr. Baring’s an old fool,” said Madge. “Mother’s got a perfectly sound heart.”

Having poured out the tea, Mrs. Pinks tactfully removed herself to the scullery, and Colonel Farrington expostulated:

“You mustn’t say that, my dear. I know Baring’s old now, and old-fashioned as well, but he’s known Muriel for thirty years, and when he says her heart has deteriorated, I know he's telling the truth. But we won’t argue over that: I just want to assure you that your mother’s opposition to your plan was only due to agitation. You rather jumped it on her, you know. When she’s had time to think it over, she’ll be as pleased as I am. Most unselfish woman living—and she's often told me how hard you work and what a dull time you have. So don’t fret, Madge, it’s all a storm in a teacup.”

“I only wish it were,” said Madge slowly. “You’re an optimist. Daddy. You always were.”

3

“Have you got any money, Anne? Money of your own, I mean?” asked Paula.

“Depends how much you want, twin. Have you been losing your purse again? Or are you broke after buying that new suit? It certainly is a poem. No one would ever think you were hard up.”

Paula looked at herself critically in Anne’s long glass. She was a slender girl, with exquisite slim ankles and pretty hands and feet. Her face, a little pale and pointed, with a minimum of make-up, was distinguished by wonderful eyes, deep blue-grey, widely set, and softly shadowed in eye cavities too deep for a young face.

“She is a lovely thing,” thought Anne, and added aloud: “Would a pound note do? I haven't been to the bank this week.”

“Oh . . . thanks awfully, but that’s not quite what I mean,” replied Paula. “It’s not me. It’s Peter. He’s been rather idiotic. And I don’t want any rows just at the moment.”

“Peter ought to manage his own financial crises, twin. He’s no business to borrow from you. He’s got a decent job, and you only earn odd bits and pieces.”

Paula smoothed her sleek fair hair thoughtfully. “He hasn't. He walked out of his job a fortnight ago. He just couldn’t stick it any longer.”

“Goodness! Does your mother know?” asked Anne.

“Of course not. She’d have been throwing fits with monotonous determination if she did. Eddie knows. He took it quite calmly. He's an intelligent old boy considering the life he’s led. He said he never expected Peter to settle in a lawyer’s office, ‘but your mother was set on it, my dear, and we had to give it a trial,’ ” added Paula, with faithful accuracy giving the very tones of Colonel Farrington’s diffident voice.

Anne laughed. “But what’s Peter doing, then, Paula? He still goes out every morning at eight-thirty.”

“Of course,” said Paula calmly. “If he didn’t the balloons would go up. He’s designing sets for Vladimir, our choreographer. Peter’s got a flair for the job, but of course he’s never had any training, and I don’t expect it’ll last. I know he’s a bit of a mess, but that’s Mother’s fault. She simply *made* a mess of him. That dotty co-ed school she sent us to during the war was hopeless for Peter. He'd have done much better if he’d gone to a common or garden secondary and learnt to work. He’s bone lazy.”

“But I thought you liked your co-ed.”

“Oh, yes. We did. I liked it because the dancing and music were really good. Peter liked it because it was free discipline, you just walked out of anything which didn’t amuse you. Hence Peter.”

“I see. And what sort of mess has he got himself into now?” asked Anne. “Is it a girl?”

“Oh, lord, no. I wish it had been. I could have coped with that. I can’t do a thing about this. It’s money. I don’t quite know all the ins and outs, money leaves me stone cold, but it’s something about backing a bill or guaranteeing a cheque. The only part of it I really understand is that the alternative’s five hundred pounds or quod for fraud. Peter’s just been had by one of his phony friends and now he’s left holding the baby.”

“Five hundred pounds . . . goodness. He’ll *have* to go to his mother for it, then,” said Anne. “I haven’t a bean, and Tony won’t produce five hundred.”

“Peter won’t go to Muriel, he’d rather go to quod. He says it’d be cheaper in the long run,” said Paula. “You see, he’s developed a thing about Muriel: she’s choked him with mother-love. The sickening part of it is that I have got the five hundred, really, left to me under Granddad’s will, only Muriel’s got it for her lifetime. I do think it’s a bit grim. Still, never mind, I’ll cope somehow. If I really set my mind to it I shall get it.”

“Don’t talk rot, Paula,” said Anne quickly. “A girl like you might be able to raise five hundred, but there’s only one way of doing it, and you’re not going to do that.”

“Let us not argue,” said Paula. “It’ll be all right on the night. Things always are. Or does the phrase offend? What a funny old thing you are.”

“Have you talked to Eddie about it?” .

“Of course not. He hasn’t a bean of his own and he’d only worry. I tried Joyce, but she and Philip are pretty well on the rocks, too. She’s an extravagant wench. It’s true I like nice clothes, but I contrive to get mine for tuppence by swapping. I got this suit from Helene in exchange for the black moire. Quite a good swap. Bye-bye, Anne. Sorry to have bothered you. I know you won’t utter. I’ll cope somehow.”

And with that Paula slithered out of the room, incredibly graceful and apparently quite untroubled.

THREE

“I WISH YOU’D COME IN and have a look at Muriel, Madge. I don’t want you to think I’m an old fuss-pot, but I don’t feel quite happy about her,” said Colonel Farrington apologetically.

It was eleven o’clock at night, and Madge was just going up to bed; she carried a glass in her hand and she answered: “Of course, if you want me to, though I assure you there’s no need to bother about Mother’s heart. It’s quite as good as mine. I forgot to take her barley water up; it’s here. Is she awake?”

“No. She’s asleep. Very heavily asleep. Baring gave her some sleeping tablets, because she complained of heart pains. I always hate dope of any kind, and I don’t like the look of her. She’s a very bad colour.”

“Poor old Daddy! How you do worry!” said Madge. “All quite unnecessary. Mother’s a typical hypochondriac, that's all.”

“You’re a little hard. Madge—but then, of course, you do understand these things,” said the Colonel. “I’m an old fool, and I know it, but I was worried in case she’d taken too much of the beastly stuff. Baring was suggesting a consultation about her heart.”

“Consultation my hat! Mother was certainly upset when I told her I wasn’t going on slaving here indefinitely, but her heart symptoms are just temper,” replied Madge.

Colonel and Mrs. Farrington had the ground floor of

Windermere House as their own flat, now that other floors were occupied by Anne and Joyce and their respective husbands. Madge opened the bedroom door very quietly and went up to Mrs. Farrington’s bed. A shaded hand lamp cast a soft glow on the sleeping woman, and Madge stood looking down at her. Mrs. Farrington was breathing rather heavily, and her husband whispered uneasily: “Do you think I ought to ring up Baring?”

“No. Of course not. Sleeping draughts often make patients breathe heavily. Baring wouldn’t have given her anything that wasn’t perfectly safe. Don’t worry, Daddy. Go to bed and forget all about her. You may get a full night’s sleep yourself for a change. I know she generally wakes you up about half a dozen times.”

“The poor soul’s a very bad sleeper,” said the Colonel. “All right, my dear. Thank you for reassuring me. You’re a good girl, Madge.” He kissed her forehead gently, and Madge whispered:

“I’m far from good—but never mind. Sleep well, Daddy, and don’t worry.”

2

“Madge, Madge, will you come at once, my dear? I’m afraid . . .”

Madge was sitting on the edge of her bed in her dressing gown when her father opened her bedroom door a crack and spoke in an urgent whisper. It had just struck six o’clock, and the March dawn was breaking, clear and luminous, while blackbirds shouted outside in the plane trees. Madge always got up at six, and did two hours’ housework before breakfast.

“All right, Daddy. Come in. What is it?”

Colonel Farrington, his face grey, his hair tousled, came into the room in his dressing gown.

“She’s dead, Madge. Dead and cold. ... I just went in to her.”

Madge stood up and gave one glance at her father’s face; then, without a word, she hurried to the door and ran down the stairs and into her mother’s room with Colonel Farrington behind her.

The hand lamp was alight beside the bed, but the heavy curtains were still pulled across the windows, and Madge went and drew the curtains back in two swift movements, so that the dawn-light flooded into the room from the long bay windows. She went quietly to the bed and put her hand on Muriel Farrington’s shoulder. Then she looked up and met her father’s anxious eyes.

‘Tm sorry. Daddy: you’re right. She’s been dead for hours. She must have died in her sleep, perfectly peacefully.”

Glancing down at the big double bed, Madge added: “You slept in your dressing room, then?”

The Colonel nodded. “Yes. She thought it best. You see, she took her sleeping tablet early, and said I might wake her up when I came to bed. I had my door open, of course, but I didn’t hear a sound, though I am a very light sleeper. Do you think she might have called me, Madge, and I—”

“No. Of course not. She hadn’t moved even; she’s just as she was when I saw her. Oh, but she drank her barley water—”

“No, dear. I drank it,” said the Colonel. “I woke up just before six and crept in here: I couldn’t hear her breathing and I switched the hand lamp on. It was a shock. Madge. I picked up the glass and drank the stuff because my throat went dry. We’d been married over thirty-five years, you know, and—well, I w as just knocked sideways.”

Madge went round the bed and took her father’s arm. “I know, Daddy. I understand. Come with me and I’ll get you a hot drink. You need it. We can’t do anything in here. Everything must be left until the doctor comes—it’s better so. I'll ring up Dr. Baring as soon as I’ve given you a drink.” He stood beside the bed a moment longer and then said slowly: “She died in her sleep, didn’t she, Madge, without knowing anything about it? I’m glad of that, because she feared to die. She looks so peaceful, no pain or struggle. Just passing out . . .”

Madge squeezed his arm. “Yes, Daddy: a continuation of sleep: the best way to die. Death that way is merciful. Now come with me; you’re cold and exhausted. Let me look after you and deal with everything.”

“Thank you, my dear,” he replied gently.

Madge took her father downstairs to the basement kitchen.

because it was warm there. She opened up the boiler fire and coaxed it to a cheerful glow with handfuls of kindling. She filled the electric kettle with hot water from the tap and it started singing almost at once.

Colonel Farrington sat by the stove, his face very grey and old, murmuring to himself: “Thirty-five years . . . It’s a long time. I often wondered which of us would go first. Better this way, perhaps. She’d have missed me, wouldn’t she, Madge?”

“Yes, Daddy. You’ve been perfect to her; never impatient, never irritable. She’d have been lost without you. Now drink this; it’s hot and it’ll

do you good. I'll go and telephone Dr. Baring."

"Thank you, my dear," he replied again.

Madge went into the drawing room, where the telephone instrument stood on a table beside Mrs. Farrington's couch, conveniently placed for the "nice little chats" she had with her friends. As she picked up the receiver, Madge was aware of a feeling of astonishment as she realised that never again would she hear Muriel Farrington's cultured voice holding these interminable telephone conversations. "Never again . . ." she murmured to herself as she dialled the doctor's number. The voice which spoke to her was not Dr. Baring's, and she repeated his name.

"Dr. Scott speaking," was the reply. "Dr. Baring is laid up. What is it?"

Madge was conscious of a shock: she had been so certain that she would hear old Dr. Baring's husky, fussy, consequential voice. Dr. Scott was his new partner, a very clever young surgeon with a brusque habit of speech and no nonsense about a bedside manner.

"This is Miss Farrington speaking, from Windermere House. My stepmother, Mrs. Farrington, has died in her sleep. Dr. Baring saw her yesterday; her heart had been giving her a lot of pain. I thought it better to let Dr. Baring know at once, before we have her moved. She was alone when she died."

"Mrs. Farrington . . he said slowly. "I examined her once, a few months ago. Her heart was sound enough then. All right. I'll come along shortly."

"Dr. Baring is not well enough to come?" asked Madge. "He saw her only yesterday. . ."

"Dr. Baring had a motor smash. He is still unconscious, so you'll have to put up with me."

"Thank you," said Madge evenly, and hung up the receiver. Dr. Scott was like that, an awkward customer, deliberately gauche and difficult. Madge remembered how furious he had made Mrs. Farrington. She went back to the kitchen. Her father was still sitting crouching over the fire, but his face was a better colour now, and he no longer shivered.

"You look warmer now, Daddy. Have another mug of tea." "Thank you, my dear. I expect the news came as a shock to poor old Baring. He'd known Muriel nearly all her life."

“It wasn’t Dr. Baring who answered the phone. Daddy. It was Dr. Scott. Baring has had a motor smash.”

“Heavens! What an extraordinary thing. I was thinking how shaky he looked yesterday—too old to drive a car. Was he badly hurt, poor old chap?”

“I don’t know. Dr. Scott is coming round himself.”

“Scott? But Muriel didn’t like him, dear.”

“I know she didn’t, Daddy, but never mind about that now. Here’s your tea. I’ve put heaps of sugar in it; it’s good for you.”

The Colonel drank his tea gratefully: he had a very sweet tooth, and his wife had never allowed him to take liberties with the sugar. Then Madge said:

“We’d better get things quite clear before Dr. Scott comes, Daddy. You know how abrupt and disconcerting he is. About those sleeping tablets. Do you know how many there were in the box?”

“Yes, my dear. There were eight. I gave your mother one, and the rest are in the box on the mantelpiece in my dressing room. I took them out of her room because I don’t trust the beastly things. I was afraid she might take another by mistake.”

“That’s all right, then,” said Madge. “Did she take any other medicine last night?”

“Just our senna tea, dear. Muriel always made it, and we shared it between us. half a glass each.”

“I remember,” said Madge. “Now you’d better go and dress. Daddy. I'll come up with you and find your things, and you can dress in the bathroom. I’ll let Dr. Scott in and fetch you if he wants you.”

3

“Those are the tablets, my dear,” said Colonel Farrington, lifting the little round box from the mantelpiece in his dressing room. “There are seven left, just as I said.”

“I see. Put them back where they were,” said Madge. “Now go and have a wash and get dressed.”

He obeyed her like a child, and when he had closed the bathroom door Madge went into her stepmother's room and drew the bedclothes down a little. The waxen face was untroubled, the eyes shut, the jaw in place, supported by the pillows, for the dead woman lay on her side. She wore an old-fashioned cambric nightdress and a dainty knitted sleeping jacket. The loose sleeve of the latter was crumpled up a little, leaving the forearm bare. In the blue-veined arm was a tiny red spot—a recent puncture from a hypodermic needle. Madge stared at it, standing very still, then she replaced the bedclothes as they had been before.

She caught sight of her own face in the mirror, and went to the dressing table to smooth her hair. Her long dressing gown fastened with a zip from hem to throat, and now her hair was combed through she looked perfectly tidy. She went outside into the hall, and to her surprise she saw Paula standing at the foot of the stairs. It was most unusual for Paula to appear before ten o'clock in the morning.

"Is anything the matter?" Paula almost gasped out her words.

"Why do you ask, and what made you get up at this hour?" asked Madge.

"I heard you come downstairs."

"I always come downstairs at six o'clock. You don't generally find it necessary to come down yourself."

"Oh, Madge, don't be beastly. I had a bad dream or something. Is Mother all right?"

"Go back to bed," said Madge tersely. "The doctor's just coming, that's his car. You've only got a nightdress on and not much of that. Go back to your room before I open the front door."

"Madge—is she dead?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

Paula did not answer. Instead she turned and ran upstairs, her chiffon nightdress shimmering over her white body.

Madge went to the front door and drew the bolts. Dr. Scott was just running up the flight of steps outside.

"Good morning, Miss Farrington. May I have a word with you? This must have been a shock to you."

"Please come in, Doctor." Madge led him to the drawing room.

“You are a state registered nurse, I believe,” he said, and she nodded.

“Then you would know if Mrs. Farrington’s heart had deteriorated of late?”

“I only know that Dr. Baring said it had deteriorated. My stepmother did not expect, or need, any nursing. Apart from the fact that she rested a good deal and avoided exertion, she led quite a normal life.”

“Have you had any experience of heart cases?”

“Obviously. All nurses have, but I never specialised in that line. I did theatre work.”

“Quite. You can see I must make some inquiries, because Mrs. Farrington was not my patient, and Dr. Baring is in no state to give information. Speaking from your nursing experience, did you think Mrs. Farrington’s heart w[r]as likely to give out?”

Madge faced him steadily. “Her death was a great surprise to me. I didn’t take her heart pains very seriously, because she was of the hypochondriac type. Obviously I was wrong, but hearts are often incalculable.”

“Admittedly. I take it you saw Dr. Baring when he called yesterday?”

“No. I did not. I hardly ever saw him. My stepmother preferred to see him alone. As I run this house and do the cooking as well, I don’t leave my work unless I am needed, but my father saw Dr. Baring and he will be able to tell you what he said.”

“Did Dr. Baring prescribe any medicine?”

“He gave my stepmother some sleeping tablets. She took one. The rest are in a box in the dressing room.”

“When did you last see Mrs. Farrington?”

“At eleven o’clock last night. My father asked me to come in. She was asleep, and I didn’t disturb her. I noticed nothing abnormal about her, except that she was breathing rather heavily.”

“Thank you. I will examine her now, and see your father later.”

Madge led him to the bedroom. “The sleeping tablets are on the mantelpiece in the dressing room there,” she said. “Do you wish me to stay?”

“No. I will call you if I want you.”

Ten minutes later Dr. Scott’s hand went automatically to his cigarette case, but he put the case back without opening it. He was not feeling very happy. Scott had no opinion of his aged partner; in the younger man's opinion Baring had no business to have gone on practising, even though he now visited only a few old patients. Forgetful, old-fashioned, and, to Scott’s mind, slovenly, Baring’s judgment had deteriorated. Standing by the bed, Scott asked himself irritably: “What’s the old fool done, and what do *I* do?”

He went to the bedroom door and opened it, glancing out across the hall, and Madge came towards him. Motioning her into the bedroom, he inquired: “Did Dr. Baring give this patient any injections?”

“I don't know, though I believe something was said about injections for colds or hay fever or catarrh. My father would know. He’s in the drawing room.”

“Very well. I’ll be with him in a moment.”

Scott stood still for a moment, his lively mind darting from one disquieting thought to another. “Muddled his doses . . . anaphylactic shock . . . might be. Forgot his reading glasses and bunged in the wrong dope. Lord, what a thought. Didn’t even enter up his visits and treatment. What does A. do now?” He stood and looked down at the peaceful cadaver, and another misgiving assailed him. “Did the poor old muddle-head realise he’d committed an almighty bloomer while he was on his way home, slam down his accelerator, and charge a lamp standard as the easiest way out of the mess? Seems to provide an explanation for an incomprehensible accident.” Pulling the sheet up over the rigid body, Scott went outside again. “I should like to see your father, please,” he said to Madge.

“He is waiting for you in the drawing room.”

“Very good. Will you come in too, please.”

Madge, still in her long tailored dressing gown, followed Scott into Mrs. Farrington’s elegant old-fashioned drawing room. The Colonel was now dressed, neat and composed, though his face was drawn and haggard.

“I am sorry to have to trouble you with questions at such a time,” said Scott, “but your wife was not my patient, and Dr. Baring is not likely to be able to give us any help.”

“I am very sorry about Baring’s accident,” replied the Colonel. “I understand your difficulties, Doctor, so go ahead.” He spoke quite steadily, and Scott said:

“Thank you. First, were you present when Dr. Baring examined your wife yesterday?”

“No. He saw her in her bedroom and I stayed in here and spoke to him afterwards. My wife was a very reticent woman in some ways: she had the sensitiveness of her generation, and she would never have wished me to be present during a medical examination.”

“I understand. Would you tell me, as far as you can remember, what Dr. Baring reported to you.”

The Colonel rubbed his grey head. “I will do my best, but Baring was less lucid than usual. The fact was he seemed far from well himself, shaky and uncertain. However, he certainly did say, ‘No immediate occasion for alarm, but I will arrange for a consultation. The pulse is irregular and there are some murmurs which I don’t like.’ Actually, the poor old chap looked so shaky himself, I didn’t press him further.”

“What time did he call?”

“Around seven o’clock. I had telephoned to him earlier in the day at my wife’s request; she complained of heart pains and faintness. I rang him again at six o’clock.”

“He did not mention any injections?”

“Not Baring himself. My wife told me that he was giving her a series of injections for the colds and catarrh which troubled her. She did not say very much about it, as we had had a difference of opinion on the matter. I am strongly against this modern craze for injections, but there, you don’t want my opinions.”

Madge put in a word here. “Surely Dr. Baring’s casebook will give you the information you want, Doctor.”

Scott was conscious of intense irritation: he hated muddles and confusion, and this case was one vast muddle. He replied:

“When Dr. Baring’s car crashed, there was no police officer immediately available. Several people went to his assistance, and it was found later that his medical case had been stolen. As his notebook was also missing, it is to be presumed that that was stolen, too.”

Madge made no reply, and Scott finally made up his mind.

“I am sorry, but in the circumstances I cannot write a certificate, because I am uncertain of the cause of death. A postmortem will have to be

held to determine it."

There were a few seconds of dead silence; then the Colonel said: "I don't pretend that your decision is a welcome one, Doctor, but you know your duty and you must perform it."

"1 respect you for that reply, sir," answered Scott. "Now, as to other details. Dr. Baring saw your wife at seven o'clock. Was she in bed?"

"Yes. She had gone to lie down earlier in the day, and got into bed after tea," replied the Colonel.

"Did she take anything to eat?"

"Only a glass of hot milk, with a few drops of brandy added, after Baring left. I sat with her from eight o'clock until nine, when she listened to the news. Immediately after the news, I gave her one of the sleeping tablets Baring had left for her. She then said she would settle down to sleep. I went out for a stroll, to get some fresh air, and looked into her room at ten o'clock. At eleven, when I myself went to bed, I looked into her room again. She was breathing heavily, and I turned the light on beside her bed—a carefully shaded light—"

Again Madge interposed. "My father asked me to come in and look at her. I was bringing her barley water up, as it had been forgotten. Father was worried, but I could see nothing which caused me to think my stepmother was ill. She was sleeping quietly apart from the fact that she breathed rather heavily. Obviously my judgment was wrong."

"This barley water," said Scott. "There was an empty glass beside Mrs. Farrington's bed. Had she drunk her barley water?"

"No," replied the Colonel. "When I went in to her at six this morning, the glass was still full, just as Madge had left it. I turned on the hand lamp when I realised my wife was not breathing. The shock of seeing her dead shook me up pretty badly. I drank the barley water myself because my throat seemed to go dry and I was a bit muddled."

Scott looked down at the old man's haggard face, and for once the young surgeon spoke gently. ''I understand. I'm sorry, sir, I realise it was a terrible blow for you, and I respect you very much for the clarity and courage with which you have answered my questions. Now I will make all arrangements and save you as much distress as I can."

"Thank you, Doctor. Very good of you," replied the Colonel.

Madge watched with an inscrutable face as Scott went back into Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom, and then took her father’s arm. “Come downstairs into the warm, Daddy. It’s cold in here.”

He followed her without a word.

4

Coming upstairs again from the kitchen, Madge met Anne in the hall. “Madge, is there anything I can do? Paula's only just told me. Tony’s still asleep. He doesn't even know yet.”

“So much the better,” said Madge coldly. “You can keep Tony and Paula and everybody else out of the way if you want to help. There’s nothing anybody can do except keep quiet and not make a fuss. The ambulance will be coming in a minute. Scott wants a p.m.”

Anne gasped. “Oh God . . . why?”

"Because she wasn’t his patient and he won’t sign a certificate without an examination. Baring’s had a motor smash and can’t help.”

“But it was her heart, wasn’t it?” gasped Anne.

“It’s no business of mine to say what it was,” snapped Madge, “and for goodness sake, don’t go all emotional over it.” '

“Where's Eddie? Can I go and talk to him?” asked Anne.

“He’s down in the kitchen. He was cold and shaky, and I persuaded him to stay there. It’s warm down there.”

“I’ll go down to him, poor old darling ... or ought I to go and fetch Tony?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, don’t do anything of the kind. We don’t want the whole family in the hall tripping over the stretcher men,” snapped Madge. “Listen. That’s the ambulance bell. Go down and fetch Eddie. He’s the only one who matters.”

Anne went down the kitchen stairs. She, too, felt cold and shaky—and frightened. But when she saw Colonel Farrington’s grey face, Anne forgot her own feelings; forgot, too, about Tony and Madge and everything else. “Eddie, dear, I’m so sorry!” she cried.

FOUR

“COME IN. WHAT’S YOUR TROUBLE?” asked Dr. Scott curtly. It was the end of his evening surgery, and the sight of the tall, well-set-up fellow in the doorway was rather irritating to a busy doctor who enjoyed “interesting” cases. This chap looked as healthy as a man could. The newcomer proffered a card.

“I thought it’d be simpler if you finished your surgery before I butted in,” he observed.

The card informed Scott that his visitor’s name was Macdonald, his rank, Chief Inspector, C.I.D.

“I see,” said Scott. “Glad to meet you. I’ve heard you giving evidence. Incidentally, what have I done?”

“As to that, I have no information, save that you asked for a p.m. on a Mrs. Farrington. I have come to tell you the result of the autopsy. Thanks to your own promptness in supplying the necessary specimen, they were able to ascertain that death was caused by an injection of insulin.”

“Cripes!” said Scott.

Having uttered this monosyllable, he produced his cigarette case and held it out to Macdonald. “I’d practically taken out my fountain pen to write that certificate,” Scott added.

Macdonald held out his lighter. “Would you like to tell me why you didn’t—or not?” he inquired.

Scott looked at the Chief Inspector’s long, lean face: met he half-smiling, observant eyes, reflected on the quiet voice, ind synthesised his impressions in the judgment that here was i man he could talk to. a man who had something in common with himself.

“Am I allowed a word off the record—or not, to use your approach?” he inquired.

”By all means. I have a man outside, and he can take down a statement in due course. For the moment we have 10 witness, and I’m listening.”

“Right. Deceased was not my patient. I had examined her once, three months ago, at Dr. Baring’s request. Baring was my partner. He died last night as the result of injuries in a motor smash which happened just after his last visit to Mrs. Farrington. In my opinion Mrs. Farrington’s heart and general health were as sound as those of most women of her age.” He paused, and Macdonald nodded. Scott continued: “Seeing :his :s off the record, I admit that I thought Baring should lave retired. He was seventv-six, his faculties were fading. Damn all, I might as well say it. though we generally don’t. He was past his job. But the few old patients he still visited doted on him. They hate me like stink. Is that clear enough?”

“Perfectly clear. Thank you for the opinion. It will go no farther.”

“Right. Well, at 6.10 **A.M.** on Tuesday, March twenty-seventh, Miss Farrington rang up to inform Baring that her stepmother had died in her sleep. Baring was dying himself. [*d got a busy day in front of me, (and I thought I’d knock one job off straight away. I went round at once. I judged death had taken place about two hours previously, during deep or coma. Rigor had just begun to set in on the neck and shoulders. But I did not believe death was caused by heart failure. Three months ago the patient’s heart was normal, incidental pains being due to distended colon—call it wind. Her physique was good and the body showed no signs of illness. She’d just died quietly. There was a clear mark of a hypodermic puncture, quite a neat job, on her left forearm.”

Scott met Macdonald’s eyes, and the latter said: “Putting two and two together, I take it you felt in a quandary?”

“Like hell I did,” replied Scott feelingly. “We don’t like stinks in our job, any more than you do in yours. You see, Baring’s motor smash seemed quite idiotic. He put his foot on the throttle and charged a lamppost quite unnecessarily, and seemed to have avoided the necessity of giving a certificate of death from heart failure with me looking on, if you follow my line of thought,”

“I follow.”

Scott almost laughed. “Well, there I was. I knew what I thought; may the good Lord forgive me, for I was wrong. I made the obvious inquiries. Old Farrington’s a nice old boy, straight and clearheaded. The .stepdaughter, Madge Farrington, is a state registered nurse. We’ll go back to her later. But their combined evidence was quite clear: deceased had been

awake and talkative for at least two hours after Baring had seen her, having presumably injected God knows what. She had taken food and a sleeping tablet, and had been breathing heavily at eleven o'clock. According to the nurse stepdaughter, patient appeared normal at eleven o'clock. Well, there it was. It'd have saved a lot of trouble to write a certificate."

"But you didn't write one."

"No. Human nature's very generalised. Medical men aren't archangels, though we do our best. I didn't want to rake over poor old Baring's error of commission or omission. I'll tell you one thing bang out, and you can write me off as a skunk if you like. One of the things that kept my fountain pen in my pocket was that I was perfectly certain that Miss Madge Farrington had read my mind like a book. I reckoned that she also was certain that her stepmother had not died of heart failure. She also had observed that hypodermic puncture, and she also had her *own* opinion of Baring. Well, that stiffened me. I told them I didn't know what was the cause of death and a p.m. was necessary. But it was quite a close thing. You see, Baring had said persistently her heart was this, that, or the other, and who was I to state he was wrong?"

Macdonald nodded. "It appears that he was wrong, all the same. Here's the report. Would you like to tell me what made you think of insulin?"

"Well, it was just one of those ideas. I was puzzled, and there was the puncture mark of the hypodermic. Added to which, I'm not one of those blokes who's afraid of being snorted at if I prove to be wrong. Insulin . . . damn it all, it would have been so easy, and such a good chance it'd never be discovered. Anyway, I reckoned I couldn't do any harm by sending in a specimen and marking it priority. It had to be done pronto. Another hour would have kippered it. And now it's your job to spot the optimist.''

"That's about it. I believe I'm right in saying that insulin injected into the blood stream of a normal non-diabetic lays them out within about half an hour."

Scott nodded. "Yes. About that. It's used, as you doubtless know, to cause a period of blackout in some cases of nervous instability, and also of drug addiction. The balance of the blood is restored by a counter-injection after a carefully considered interim. If the counter-injection were not given, the patient would go out in a coma, just as a diabetic may in the absence of insulin."

Macdonald nodded. “How does a member of the general public set about acquiring insulin?” he asked, and Scott grunted.

“Yes,” he replied, “I thought that was coming.” He lighted another cigarette and frowned over his papers. “Oh, well,” he said. “I might as well tell you everything that occurs to me right away. It’ll save your time and mine, and it’s less undignified than having the idea winkled out. Baring was one of those old boys who like to look up-to-date. He’d got one of those attache-case outfits which the swell firms love to supply. Drugs to meet every emergency. You should know,” he ended abruptly.

Macdonald chuckled. “We should and do. We spend an unconscionable amount of time trying to trace the cases which get stolen with tedious frequency from the unlocked cars of busy G.P.’s.”

“Right. And you also know that by the time a conscientious police constable arrived at the spot where Baring crashed his car, the super outfit of lethal drugs, various, was no longer in evidence.”

Macdonald nodded, “Is there any evidence that Dr. Baring had got that case with him when he left the Farringtons?”

“None whatever,” said Scott. “It was like this. Baring had had a touch of flu. Nothing serious, but he was bunged up with catarrh and dizzy with quinine. The poor old chap hadn’t wanted to go out at all, but Colonel and Mrs. F. kept on yattering away at him on the phone. He asked me to go. I said, ‘Not on your life.’ I’d got a couple of confinements, an interesting pneumonia, and a probable appendix on my hands, and I wasn’t doing any of Baring’s fancy cases. Thinking it over, I suppose you could tell me I’m therefore morally responsible for the whole to-do.”

“I suppose I could,” said Macdonald; “but I’m not, so go on.”

“Thanks. When Baring got to the Farringtons’ he wasn’t feeling all that. Even the Colonel, who’s not the world’s brightest, said Baring seemed shaky, ‘less lucid than usual’ was the way the Colonel put it. The two old buffers had the usual heart-to-heart about the missis’s state of health after Baring’s examination, and Baring recommended a consultation at some later date—that was always one of his good cards. Prosperous patients like it. Shows they’re being taken seriously. Incidentally, it’s up to you to discover whether the Colonel, in the kindness of his heart, gave poor old Baring a double whisky.”

“And that strikes me as a highly intelligent suggestion,” said Macdonald. “I like it much better than the idea of Dr. Baring accelerating and charging a lamppost as he realised what he had or had not done. The double whisky could also have been responsible for absence of mind. He could have forgotten his case; a combination of flu, quinine, and whisky might well have tended to make him forgetful. Now, before we go any farther, am I right in supposing that you wrote a report after you came home from the Farringtons’?”

“You’re perfectly right,” said Scott grimly. “I’m one of the careful kind. I’ll get it for you. It’s in the safe. I can’t swear it’s absolutely verbatim, but in my opinion my memory is as accurate as most.”

He got up, opened the safe, and produced some typed sheets, which Macdonald read through.

‘Thanks. Admirably explicit. I take it you could swear to the essentials?”

“Yes. I typed it out as soon as I got home. You see, I didn't like it. Any of it.”

2

“Although you have only been to the Farringtons’ house twice, you seem to have noticed quite a bit about them.” said Macdonald. “It'd be very helpful if you’d tell me any general impressions.”

“Provided the general impressions are off the record.” said Scott. “Don’t mistake me. I know a man of your experience isn’t going to be biased by opinions of mine, but I like to draw a very clear line between the objective and the subjective, if I may put it that way.”

“Why not? You*could give an objective opinion on the state of my liver, but not on my moral character or tendencies,” replied Macdonald. “Sticking to the subjective for the moment: have you any comment to make on the girl in the nightgown whom you saw on the stairs? You mentioned the incident in your report, and it seems to me you limited yourself to essentials, or what struck you as essentials.”

“Correct,” said Scott. “Well, the girl was Paula Farrington, the youngest daughter. She'd consulted me professionally some two months ago, quite a trivial matter, a strained muscle. She’s a dancer. She struck me as being the typical modern product, likely to come a cropper sooner or later because she uses her nervous system to supply the energy she ought to obtain from eating a lot of good food and sleeping eight hours a night. A professional dancer needs food and sleep. I thought she was strained and fatigued, though she tried to camouflage it under a vague and casual manner.”

“You didn’t like her.” observed Macdonald.

“There was something about her I didn’t like, though she’s a beautiful creature. She talked about her mother, and I got the feeling she was trying to pump an opinion out of me— which she didn’t get. Now, when Madge Farrington opened the door to me on Tuesday morning, I caught a glimpse of the other girl whisking round the head of .the stairs. Nothing in that, of course. I was surprised there weren’t more of the family around; there’s a whole clan of them living in that house. But this girl, Paula, didn’t go back to her room and get dressed, although she’d only got a wisp of a nightdress or, and it was a cold morning. She stayed on the landing until I left the house. I couldn’t see her, but I have a very acute sense of smell and I loathe scent. Paula must use those stinking bath essences which you can smell a mile away. Madge Farrington doesn’t use scent, but I could smell this exotic stink each time I passed through the hall. The girl was up there all right, listening, but I don’t think she’d have got much satisfaction. There are good doors in that house, and I saw they were shut.”

Macdonald glanced down at Scott’s report. “Judging from what you have just said, you would have realised if Paula had recently been in her mother’s bedroom.”

“She hadn’t, not recently. There was no smell of scent in there at all.”

“Right. Now about the nurse, Madge.”

“The only information I have about Madge is derived from Baring. I’ve got to be careful here, because I’m liable to give too much weight to my own impressions and judgments. Madge Farrington trained at St. Nathaniel's from 1939 to 1944. They had a tough time there, you remember, being bombed repeatedly owing to their proximity to the docks. In 1944 she crocked up, had a bad nervous breakdown, and was in the Stand Barton

clinic for six months. She then had three months in a convalescent home, and later went back to Windermere House to housekeep for her parents. The only reason I know anything about this is because Baring asked me for an opinion on nerve cases, with particular reference to the Stand Barton methods." Scott paused and then added abruptly; "It appeared that her stepmother was worried about Madge. Mentioned various symptoms to Baring and hinted at a relapse."

There was a moment's silence and then Macdonald said: "I see," and made no further comment for a second or two. Then he asked: "Was Mrs. Farrington a dominating type:"

Scott nodded.

"Well, since you feel scruples about going on, let's fall back on the question-and-answer method," said Macdonald.

"Do you think there's a possibility that the stepmother tried to retain power over her stepdaughter by cooking up theories of a feared relapse?"

Scott nodded. "I got that impression, but I may have been quite wrong."

"Will you hazard any opinion as to the stepdaughter's present mental state?"

Til tell you my own impressions, but they're not worth anything. I'm a surgeon. Neuropathology is right off my beat. Madge Farrington is fully self-controlled. Physically, she is fit, strong and steady. Hands, eyes, balance, all normal and co-ordinated. And it is worth while remembering this. When I said I couldn't sign a certificate, she never batted an eyelid. I watched her. I believe there is a certain type of neurotic who can give every appearance of normality until they are faced with something which goes dead against their will. Then they break up. She's not that type."

Again Scott paused, and Macdonald waited. At last the doctor said:

"To sum up. Madge Farrington did not believe her stepmother had a weak heart. She said to me, 'Her death was a great surprise to me.' She probably believed that Baring would have given a certificate without hesitation, and she had expected Baring to answer the phone. She knows about the properties of insulin and the use of a hypodermic. And I should imagine that she had very good reason for hating her stepmother. Finally, I think it's worth remembering that the facts I have mentioned in summing up

are probably known to every other member of that curiously assorted household."

"I think that's very fairly put," said Macdonald. "You speak about the curiously assorted household. Do you know anything about any of the others?"

"I can give you a general idea, if that's any good."

"I should be glad if you would. I prefer to know the identities of those in a big household if I get the chance."

"Right. You've heard so far about the Colonel, and Madge Farrington, his daughter by a first marriage. Mrs. Farrington's son, also by an earlier marriage, a fellow named Strange, has one floor of the house. He's married. I've seen his wife: she came to me about a grumbling appendix. She's about thirty, intelligent, good-looking, but lacking the guts to find a home of her own. There's another married couple on the floor above—daughter to Colonel and Mrs. Farrington and her husband. I don't know either of them. Finally, the twins, Paula and Peter. Peter was Baring's patient. I've caught sight of him. A picturesque youth who rouses the worst in me. That's the lot."

"Thanks. Quite a selection," said Macdonald. "It's unusual to find prosperous families living en masse."

"It's a damned big house. Mrs. Farrington owned it, not her husband."

"Is that so. Was she by way of being the matriarch?"

"That's about it."

"You have carefully avoided giving me any opinion about her," commented Macdonald, "except that her heart and general health weren't so bad as she liked to think."

Scott snorted impatiently and then said: "I've been trying to be fair. I'll tell you my opinion, but kindly remember that she was the type of woman who makes me see red. You see, before this National Health came into operation, a woman like Mrs. Farrington could command as much of a doctor's time as she chose. She was a profitable patient, and quite prepared to pay for the luxury of having a medical man on a string, if he were fool enough to let her. There's plenty of disease and suffering in the world without wasting time on hypochondriacs. When I had to see her one day when Baring was laid up, she thought she was going to have the luxury of

telling me her life story plus that of her family. Well, it wasn't a success. In my opinion she was a self-indulgent humbug, and she domineered over the entire household."

"Including her husband?"

"Well, no. I shouldn't put it quite like that. He's a nice old chap, with a sort of old-fashioned courtesy and a strong sense of duty. He was genuinely fond of her, and because of his affection he wasn't aware of the way she exploited 'her frail state of health,' as he put it. Also, I think he'd developed a technique for dealing with her, and said 'Yes, dear' in tones of perfect sympathy without noticing very much what she said. He's a very kindly old chap. I've heard some of my poorer patients talk about his generosity."

"Well, I'm much obliged to you, Dr. Scott. You've been most helpful. If you're willing to let me have this report, I needn't bother you about any other statement for the moment."

"Oh, yes. Take it by all means. Shall I sign it? I'll abide by everything I've written down."

He scrawled his name at the bottom of the typescript and handed it to Macdonald, who took it with a word of thanks and then added: "Anything else you'd like to add?" "Nothing that's of any use to you," said Scott. "I shall be interested to know what you make of it. I sometimes get cases in which diagnosis looks easy, and later on I find the obvious symptom is no indication at all of the disease the patient is suffering from."

"Yes," said Macdonald. "We get analogous cases, but experience has taught me to suspect the obvious on certain occasions. I think this may be one of them."

"It's not going to be easy," said Scott slowly. "I'll lay any money that whatever else it is, it's not one of those easy ones."

FIVE

IT WAS JUST AFTER HALF-PAST NINE the following morning (Thursday) that Macdonald approached Windermere House and saw a charwoman actually hearthstoning the flight of steps leading up to the dignified front door. She was just finishing the bottom step, and Macdonald said:

“It doesn’t seem fair to walk up your steps when you’ve taken all that trouble to whiten them. It’s hard work, isn’t it?”

“Sinful waste of time, ain’t it?” she replied. “But there, it looks posh. I’m proud of ’em: there’s not a flight o’ steps for miles looks as good as these ’ere. Walk up and welcome. Was you wanting somebody?”

“Colonel Farrington. Is he at home?”

“Bless you, yes. He's in the kitchen, polishing off his own shoes, if you’ll believe me. Takes a real gent to clean ’is own shoes. ‘Mrs. Pinks’ ’e says to me, ‘I’m proud of doing me shoes, just like you're proud of your steps.’ That’s the Colonel, one o’ the best. A real gent, and no airs with it. Come in, second on your right. What name shall I say?”

“Macdonald. The Colonel doesn’t know me, but ask him if he can spare a minute.”

The room which Macdonald entered was a drawing room of the Edward and Alexandra period. Its rosewood tables and chairs, grand piano, cabinets, and bookcases were all beautiful old pieces, all polished and immaculate. The carefully placed cretonne-covered settee and easy chairs, with well-plumped-up cushions, told of a room recently cleaned and tidied, but there were no personal possessions lying about: no books or papers or needlework, no flowers in the vases, no fire in the grate. It was not a room in use, just a room that had been “done.” The door opened and Colonel Farrington came in. He wore grey flannel trousers and a comfortable old tweed coat, a black tie, soft collar, and very well-polished shoes.

“Good morning,” he said. “I don’t think we’ve met before.”

“Good morning, sir. I am sorry to have to bother you. I’m a C.I.D. man, and it is my duty to tell you the findings of the post-mortem examination on Mrs. Farrington.”

Macdonald’s voice was very quiet and steady, and Colonel Farrington listened with an unhappy face, but he looked neither astonished nor shocked, only deeply troubled.

“C.I.D.,” he repeated. “That can only mean one thing. I’m very sorry, but I feared it. I feared it all the time. . . . Poor old chap. He was a good man in his day, and the kindest soul alive. Do you mind coming in to my study—Superintendent, is it? Chief Inspector—thanks. I can’t bear this room now. It seems dead without my wife’s little things lying about. It was so much her drawing room, hasn’t changed for thirty years.”

He led the way across the hall and opened a door at the back of the house and led Macdonald into a tiny room. There was a closed roll-top desk in it, two chairs, and a bookcase with books of reference in it. Golf clubs stood in one corner, and some fishing gear in another: regimental groups were on the wall but no other pictures or photographs. The room was tidy and bare and businesslike, its wallpaper faded, its curtains drab, but the Colonel sat down in his swivel chair as though he felt at home there.

“I should be obliged if you would tell me the facts quite plainly, Chief Inspector.” he said.

“Very good, sir. Mrs. Farrington died as the result of an injection of insulin.”

“Insulin?” repeated the Colonel wonderingly. “I thought that was only used in cases of . . . what is it? Diabetes. But my wife wasn't diabetic.”

“No, sir. It was on that account that the insulin killed her.”

“But the stuff isn’t poisonous, is it?” asked the Colonel helplessly. “I know I’m very ignorant of these things, but I thought it was used to cure disease.”

“It is used to correct the composition of the blood in diabetic patients whose organs are not producing the necessary secretions,” replied Macdonald. “When injected into the blood stream of a normal non-diabetic person, the result is coma, followed by death.”

“And Baring made this appalling mistake, injecting the wrong substance?” said the Colonel, his voice horrified and miserable.

“No, sir. It is quite impossible that Dr. Baring injected insulin, assuming that Dr. Scott reported correctly the facts you and your daughter told him.”

“Then he can’t have reported them correctly,” said the Colonel, “or else I must have confused him by something I said myself.”

“I have come to you, sir, to get a statement at first hand,” said Macdonald. “As you probably know, we are scrupulous about getting firsthand statements when it is possible to do so.”

“Quite right, quite right,” said the Colonel. “Don’t think I was casting any imputations. I believe that Dr. Scott is a very clever doctor. And I like him, you know. He seemed to me very straight, with a real sense of duty. I felt he was a man I could trust, and I’ve had a bit of experience.” His hand fumbled in his pocket, and Macdonald produced a packet of cigarettes and held it out.

“Oh, very kind of you, very kind indeed,” said the Colonel hastily. “I’m ashamed to say I’m quite out. Got out of my routine, you know. I still can’t get used to it. Muriel, my wife, had a wonderful memory. Always reminded me of things. Now, about the facts you want. Where shall I begin?”

“Would you give me an outline of events on the Monday, the day Mrs. Farrington died?” asked Macdonald. “Start with the morning.” ,

“Good idea,” agreed the Colonel, puffing away at his cigarette. “Always like to approach a problem. We slow down as we get older, and the mind's less adaptable. I always try to go steady and not make hasty judgments. Now, on Monday I was at home all day. It was in the morning my wife began to feel poorly. She’d gone down to the kitchen to have a chat with Madge. Madge is my daughter, and she runs the house for us. Very capable girl. I think it must have been the basement stairs upset Muriel. They’re nasty stairs, steep and awkward.”

“One of the drawbacks in a house of this period,” observed Macdonald easily, and the Colonel nodded.

“You’re right. I've always thought it was a sinful thing the way domestic servants were expected to carry loads up those stairs, but that’s by the way. When she came back to our flat—that’s this floor, you know—I persuaded Muriel to lie down in the drawing room. She felt faint and short of breath. I rang Baring, and his secretary said she would give him my

message. Muriel seemed very seedy, and I thought she was a bit fussed about herself. Didn't want much lunch, though Madge sent her up a very nice tray. Lay down in the afternoon; I read to her for a while. After tea I got really put out with Baring. I felt he was neglecting my wife. I rang again and spoke very tersely, very tersely indeed. I feel a bit ashamed of it now, poor old chap. He wasn't really fit to come out, you know. I persuaded Muriel to get into bed, and rang up to put off some friends who had been coming to play bridge, and I tried to calm her. She was in pain, and I felt really worried. Baring came just before seven, and I left him with her. She preferred to see him alone. I was very relieved when he came. He always had a calming effect on Muriel. Very good manner, you know. I always think these clever young doctors like Scott make a mistake in despising a gentle manner. After all, what's a doctor for? Though, as I told you, I liked Scott. I was surprised. He was very kind to me and I felt he was genuine. I was a bit bowled over, you know. We'd been married for thirty-five years—and there it was."

"I realise what a shock you suffered. sir," said Macdonald, "and so did Dr. Scott. I am quite sure he *is* genuine."

"Glad to hear you say so," said the Colonel. "Well, Baring spent quite a time with my wife. Twenty minutes at least. Then he came and joined me in the drawing room. There was a good fire in there, and he looked cold and grey. I suddenly realized how old he looked, shaky and exhausted. I say, stop me if I'm running on. I know I tend to be garrulous nowadays. Muriel noticed it. She was a most intelligent woman."

"I don't want to stop you. I want you to go on telling me things exactly as you have been doing, perfectly naturally," said Macdonald. "You are being an admirable witness." "Well, you've been very considerate to me, Chief Inspector. I can't tell you how glad I am to have a man of your calibre on the job. You're taking the trouble to listen, and very few fellows do that nowadays, not to a back number like me. We'll get to the bottom of this together. It's a painful business and I don't deny it, but I feel confident you'll see where the confusion arose. Now, where was I?"

"You asked Dr. Baring into the drawing room," prompted Macdonald.

"Ah, yes. Poor old chap. He said, 'No immediate cause for alarm, Colonel. Just see she takes things quietly,' and then he began to cough. A shocking cough he'd got: shook him to bits. I was really concerned. I

shoved him into a comfortable chair and said, ‘You’re not fit to be out, Baring. I’m sorry to have brought you out, I am indeed. You sit still for a minute.’ I mixed him a small whisky and said, ‘You just put this down. Do you good. I’ll have a word with Muriel and then come back here.’ I went across to the bedroom— we’re on the one floor here—and told Muriel I’d be back in a moment, and Baring was quite satisfied. Didn’t want her to get worked up. you know. Then I went to the drawing room. Baring was hunched up over the fire, half dozing. He woke up when I spoke to him. and said, ‘I’m about done, Farrington. Time I gave up. You can’t cure anno Domini.’ I was upset, never heard him speak like that before. I tried to cheer him up, and he pulled himself together and began to talk about Muriel. Said he’d arranged a consultation and mumbled on about pulse rate and murmurs. Between you and me, Chief Inspector, I could hardly make out what he said. I’ve thought since-Still, no use thinking after the event.”

“I’d be glad if you told me what you thought, all the same,” said Macdonald.

“I oughtn’t to have given him that whisky, ought I?” asked the Colonel unhappily. “I realised afterwards he’d probably had one before he came out, feeling cold and shaky like that. Muriel mentioned it. She disliked the smell of whisky. I didn’t say a word about this to Scott. Disagreeable business. If I hadn’t been worried about Muriel, I might have had more sense. I said to him, ‘Look here, Baring, I’ll drive you home. You don’t look well. Better let me drive you.’ But he was very affronted. Wouldn’t hear of it. He was steady enough on his feet, and I thought maybe I was making a fuss, and I didn’t want to go out at that moment and have to walk back with Muriel in the nervous state she was. So I just let him go. I felt very bad about it when 1 heard of his accident. I oughtn’t to have given him that whisky.”

“A doctor who is practising, and who knows he is going to drive himself home, ought to have enough wisdom to refuse. a drink,” said Macdonald. “When Dr. Baring went, did you go straight in to see Mrs. Farrington?”

“Yes, I went to her immediately. She seemed much better, reassured, you know, and said she’d have a little supper. But when her tray came up she didn’t fancy it, so I took it down again. To tell you the truth, I should have enjoyed eating that omelette myself, but what with one thing and another, I thought I’d better stay with Muriel and get myself a snack later.

So I sat with her, chatting about one thing and another. She told me about these damned injections Baring was giving her. 1 didn't say anything much, 1 didn't want to upset her, but I'm strongly against all this hanky-panky with bugs. Half the time these medical johnnies are just experimenting. But let that pass. I stayed with my wife until just after the nine o'clock news. Then I gave her one of the sleeping tablets Baring had left for her, and some hot milk with a few drops of brandy in it, and left her quite comfortable, saying she felt sleepy. I thought I'd go out and get a sandwich at the pub, so I went up and asked Anne, my daughter-in-law, to come down to our flat while I was out, in case Muriel wanted anything, and off I toddled to the Red Lion. I was hungry, you see. It'd been rather a worrying day," he concluded.

"I quite see that," said Macdonald, and the old man went on:

"I came in about ten, and just opened Muriel's door. She was asleep, and I went and talked to Anne over the drawing-room fire. I went to my room just before eleven, and crept in to look at Muriel. I didn't like the sound of her breathing, and I went and fetched Madge. But Madge thought she seemed all right. So I went to bed."

"Thank you, sir," replied Macdonald. "There's one further point I should like to ask you about. Do you remember if Dr. Baring had his medical case in his hand when he left the house?"

"Curiously enough, I do remember that," said the Colonel. "I told you he took it amiss when I_ said I'd drive him home, and he walked out in some dudgeon. I helped him into his coat, which he'd left in the hall, and just as he was leaving I noticed he'd put his case down on the hall table when he put his coat on. I picked the case up and said, 'Hi, you mustn't leave this behind,' and he took it from me and off he went. So I do know he had his case in his hand when he left the house."

"That's all very clear, sir," replied Macdonald. "Now, could I have a word with Miss Madge? She is your daughter, I gather, and Mrs. Farrington's stepdaughter."

"Correct. Of course you can see her. You'll find she's a very clearheaded girl. I'm very fortunate in my children, they're a fine lot. Now Madge will be in the kitchen. I will fetch her. The only thing is it's damned cold in here and it's warm in the kitchen. But it's not quite the thing to ask an officer like yourself into the kitchen."

Macdonald laughed a little. “I have no feelings on that score, sir. Make it the kitchen by all means, if it’s convenient to your daughter.”

2

The kitchen at Windermere House was old-fashioned: Macdonald saw at a glance that laboursaving had been the last thought in the mind of the builder who had designed it, but it was nevertheless a very pleasant place. The huge Victorian dresser, scrubbed to whiteness, held a noble array of handsome china. The dish covers of many sizes which were ranged on the white walls were burnished like silver. The range was alight, and a clear fire burned cheerfully. Colonel Farrington preceded Macdonald into the kitchen and said:

“I’m sorry' to hinder you, Madge, my dear, but Chief Inspector Macdonald has called and he wishes to ask us all a few questions about poor Muriel. I’ve brought him down here because there's no fire on our floor and it’s a chilly morning.”

“Quite right, Daddy,” said Madge composedly. “Ask him to come in. I’ll just ask Mrs. Pinks to get on with your study, if that's all right for you.”

“Certainly, my dear, certainly. A very good idea,” replied the Colonel.

Madge stood by the kitchen table in her white coat, her hands clasped lightly in front of her, as a hospital nurse would stand before a doctor.

“Good morning. Will you sit down?” she said to Macdonald as her father and Mrs. Pinks left the kitchen.

“Thank you, Miss Farrington, and perhaps you will sit down too,” said Macdonald. She seated herself on a wooden kitchen chair and laid her clasped hands on the table. Macdonald remembered what Dr. Scott had said: “Hands, eyes, balance, all co-ordinated.” The C.I.D. man agreed. Here w[r]as a woman who moved quietly and who sat still. Only her eyes were troubled, and Macdonald knew all too well that contraction of eyes and mouth which was a natural reaction to a visa from his own department.

“I am sorry to bring you additional trouble,” went on Macdonald. “I have to tell you the findings of the post-mortem examination on Mrs. Farrington. Her death was caused by an injection of insulin.”

Madge gave one start, a jerk and tremor which ran through her from head to foot; her face whitened and her lips shut tight as she stared at Macdonald. Then she said:

“You mean she was murdered.”

“It is very difficult to find any other explanation of her death at present,” said Macdonald. “Your father believes that Dr. Baring made a mistake in his injection.”

“My father knows as much about doctoring as I do about the hydrogen bomb,” said Madge impatiently. “Dr. Baring left my stepmother about a quarter past seven. At nine o’clock she was listening to the news. Different practitioners might give you varying opinions as to the time it takes for insulin to put a patient under, but none of them would say it’s longer than an hour before a complete blackout. Often it’s much less.”

“You are acquainted with the use of insulin in certain psychological cases?”

“I am a state registered nurse.”

She spoke deliberately, her words almost a challenge, and she met Macdonald’s eyes, her own hard and steady.

“Very good,” replied the C.I.D. man quietly. “Now I asked your father if he would give me an account of events here last Monday. He did so, very clearly and willingly. Would you do the same?”

“Certainly,” said Madge. She seemed to relax a little and then said slowly: “It was one of those days. ... It was ordinary enough to begin with. I was just busy doing housework and cooking. Do you really want a detailed account of what might be called a domestic close-up?” she asked abruptly, but yet with something akin to a smile on her close lips.

“Yes, please,” said Macdonald.

“Very well. Then you shall have it. At eleven o’clock my stepmother came into the kitchen when I was making the pastry for lunch. She began talking about her birthday and said she wanted a dinner party for eight. When my stepmother said ‘dinner’ she meant ‘dinner.’ Four courses at least, and all the family silver. I just said that I would not cook and serve dinner for eight single-handed.”

“A very reasonable thing to say,” put in Macdonald.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not: My stepmother was not used to being thwarted. She immediately produced heart symptoms. I put my fingers on her pulse, which was perfectly normal, and told her so. Then my father, who has a genius for turning up at the right moment, came in here and assisted her upstairs. I gather that she went to lie down. At lunch I sent her up a tray. She ate quite a good meal. I had my own lunch down here, as I habitually do. It’s more convenient for serving the second course.

“Do you carry meals up those stairs?” asked Macdonald.

“Sometimes. Sometimes I use the service lift. It was put in in 1910. It is worked by hand and is very heavy and liable to stick. I did use it on Monday, because I didn’t want any more arguing, so I stayed down here. After lunch I washed up, tidied the kitchen, changed, and went out to pay the tradesmen’s books and do some shopping.”

“So you did not see Mrs. Farrington again before tea.”

“I did not see her again until eleven o’clock at night,” said Madge. “I saw my father when I took up tea, and he was fussed because Dr. Baring had not been. I’m afraid I told him that it was quite unnecessary to bother Dr. Baring, who was as much good as a sick headache, anyway. After tea and washing up I got busy with supper. On Mondays two old friends come in to play bridge with Daddy and Mother, and I had been asked particularly to produce a cheese souffle and a mousseline sweet. Both tiresome things to make. At half-past six my half-sister Paula came down here and asked for some sherry glasses. She and Peter had suddenly decided to have a sandwich supper for some of their friends upstairs. As I had counted Paula and Peter in for the souffle, and eggs are scarce, I wasn’t best pleased. I told them they could use their tooth glasses for the sherry.”

Macdonald’s lips twitched, and suddenly Madge laughed. A shaky laugh, but still a laugh. “It all sounds so ludicrous,” she said; “but you asked for it. Paula was livid. She said she would ask Mother for the key of the glass cabinet. I said I couldn’t care less.”

“And did Paula ask Mrs. Farrington for the key?” inquired Macdonald.

“I imagine so,” replied Madge. “There were twelve sherry glasses, very beautiful ones. There are now only nine. The twins are like that. At a quarter to seven Anne Strange came down here. Do you know our names, or must I explain?”

“I’ll stop you if you mention anybody I can’t place.”

"All right. Anne asked me why on earth I was cooking a meal. It appeared that the party was off, and neither Daddy nor my stepmother wanted any supper. I suppose it was childish, but I was furious," added Madge.

"So should I have been," said Macdonald. "You had assumed that Mrs. Farrington would be well enough for her party?"

"I knew she was well enough," said Madge, "and as a rule her bridge took precedence over her heart. I'm afraid I'm not giving you a very pleasant picture of myself, but I'm not always a pleasant person."

"Who is?" asked Macdonald. "You seem to be giving me an honest picture, which is what I want."

"Well, then something happened which was the only nice thing that whole beastly day. Mrs. Pinks, my charwoman, came to the door with a bunch of daffodils for me which she had bought 'up 'igh Road,' being Kilburn High Road, and a bag of shrimps. She believes I share her passion for shrimps. She had two of her children with her, a boy of ten and a girl of twelve. So I asked them in and gave them the cheese souffle and the mousseline. They don't often get anything nice. They wolfed down the lot inside ten minutes. They were hungry. I enjoyed that. I shall always remember it."

"Good. I sympathise with you, and it was a jolly good idea," chuckled Macdonald.

"Was it? Five minutes later Daddy came down and said Mother would like a little souffle and sweet. I said there wasn't any. He came back again and said then Mother would like an omelette. I had no more eggs, so I made an omelette of dried eggs. If you know anything beastlier, I don't. It came back untouched three minutes later. I gave it to the cat, who also didn't think much of it."

Macdonald laughed. "It certainly *was* one of those days," he said. Madge looked straight at him and then away again, and Macdonald saw that her underlip was quivering, but she joined in his laugh.

"It was all very silly, but I was tired and angry. Everyone seemed to be beastly. I washed up and decided I'd go out to the pictures. I'd had enough kitchen for that day."

"Did you go upstairs to get your outdoor things?"

“No. They were down here, in the linen room. It’s a long way up to my bedroom, and I left my coat down here

when I came in before tea. I always use the basement door when I go out.”

“And you went to the pictures?”

“No. I didn’t. It was a nice evening and there was a moon. I walked around the Outer Circle towards Baker Street, but when I got to York Gate I changed my mind about the flicks and walked up to the Inner Circle and went on right round it. It was very peaceful there.”

“I know it is. It's very beautiful, too.” said Macdonald. “It was just after nine when I got back,” said Madge. “I could hear the wireless on in my stepmother’s bedroom. I came in by the basement door and made some tea and had something to eat. Then I remembered I hadn’t sorted the laundry, which I always do on Monday. It’s quite a job, because the whole household send their laundry in the same basket, and I check the lot. I put out some linen to mend in the linen room, and the time just went. I realised it was nearly eleven, and I hadn’t taken Mother’s barley water to her room. As I took it upstairs I met my father in the hall and he asked me to come in and have a look at her.”

3

“Thinking back, and remembering what caused your stepmother’s death, do you think she was asleep or in a coma?” Macdonald spoke very quietly and watched Madge’s troubled face intently.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.” Her voice had a hopeless quality in it, as of one defeated. Then she braced herself and looked Macdonald in the face again. “I’d been up since six o’clock, and I’d been working hard nearly all day. This isn’t an easy house to work in, and I’d got in a temper and I was dog-tired. I tell you, I just didn’t care.” She paused and then added: “I had no reason to believe she was ill. I was certain her heart was nothing to worry about. I knew she had lost her temper as I had lost mine, but she had been put to bed and fussed over, and I’d had to get on with the chores. Remember, she was not my mother. She was no relation to me at all, and I didn't love her. I just glanced at her lying there, looking very comfortable in

the best linen sheets, snoring a bit as elderly patients do snore when they've had a mild barbiturate, and all I thought was Thank God she's asleep. Daddy will have a quiet night for once.' I tell you, I didn't care. But I can also swear that I had no idea she was really Ml. Anyway, I was too tired to notice. All I wanted to do was to get to bed myself."

Macdonald listened to her intently, using all his experience and analytical skill to determine if her answer was a very honest one or a very skilful one. Every word she said struck him as reasonable. "I was dog-tired and I just didn't care." Macdonald knew he could not get any further on those lines. And she hadn't even pretended to any affection for the dead woman. "I just didn't notice. I just didn't care." It flashed through Macdonald's mind that a jury would understand that: it was so harshly realistic, and no prosecuting counsel could break it down. "I was dog-tired"—and hadn't she had every reason to be dog-tired?

''So you went up to bed?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Peter and Paula had still got their party on. Their rooms are over mine, and I could hear all their racket. It was no use going upstairs to complain. 1 read for a bit and then I took three aspirin tablets and went to sleep, and didn't wake up until my alarm went off at five to six next morning."

Macdonald sat silent for a second or two. Then he said: "When I told you the cause of your stepmother's death, you said, 'Then she was murdered.' Knowing, as vou do know, the uses and effects of .insulin, that statement was perfectly logical. I think every statement you have made show's the same quality of reason and common sense. So, using those qualities, will you tell me if you know of anybody who had any motive for killing Mrs. Farrington?"

Madge answered at once. "No. I can't. And if I could, I shouldn't. You see . . . she was a maddening woman. She was selfish and domineering and intolerably inquisitive. At one time we had a gag in this house. I.C.M.H. —'I could murder her.' We've *all* said it. at one time or another: Paula and Peter, Joyce and Philip, and Anne and Tony—and me. Not Daddy. He loved her. He always did. I know we none of us meant it, but we said it." She spoke clearly, almost harshly, and then added: "I don't know who killed her. I don't want to know. But if I did know I shouldn't tell you. There are a few things which even I won't do."

SIX

“BUT THE WHOLE THING IS utterly inconceivable, Eddie,” said Anne.

Colonel Farrington had gone upstairs to see Anne after he had left Macdonald in the kitchen with Madge. He had told Anne what Macdonald had said about insulin being the cause of death, and Anne looked horrified and bewildered.

“Now don’t get upset, Anne,” begged the Colonel. “There must be an explanation, and it’s due to Baring that every inquiry should be made. You’ll like this C.I.D. man. He’s a very quiet, courteous fellow; he listens attentively and doesn’t interrupt. Quite unlike the average official of today. This chap—on my soul, he’d have made a fine officer in the Army, and I can’t say more than that. All he wants is a plain statement of fact. He’ll see his way through it, you take it from me. Clearheaded and thoughtful, and very considerate, too. So you’ve nothing to worry about, my dear. I just thought I’d let you know he was in the house. Is Paula up. do you know? He may want to see her, too. She went in to see Muriel just before Baring came. Better let Macdonald have all the details. Wiser and more dignified to meet him halfway.”

After the Colonel had left her, Anne went into her bedroom and glanced at herself in the mirror. Her reflection horrified her, for a pallid face and shadowed eyes looked back at her from the glass. She put some rouge on her cheeks, chose a discreet lipstick, and added a dark line to her arched eyebrows, conscious all the time that she felt sick and cold. It was all very well for the Colonel to take things so calmly. He had said, “There must be an explanation.” But did the police always get the right explanation? It seemed a long time before she heard voices on the stairs which heralded the arrival of Colonel Farrington and the C.I.D. man. The Colonel knocked, as he always did, and waited for her to answer before he came in.

“This is Chief Inspector Macdonald, my dear. My daughter-in-law, Mrs. Strange, Chief Inspector. Her husband is my stepson, but we claim to be ‘in-laws’ all the same.” The tall C.I.D. man bowed to Anne formally, and

she murmured, “How do you do,” as the Colonel said, “Now I’ll leave you to it. The Chief Inspector was good enough to say I gave my evidence clearly. I know he’ll say the same of you.” Having sat down, Anne turned to Macdonald and waited for him to speak.

“I asked Colonel Farrington and his daughter to tell me the events of Monday,” began Macdonald. “They were both excellent witnesses and gave me a very clear idea of the circumstances preceding Mrs. Farrington’s death. I gather that you did not actually see her on Monday, but will you tell me in your own words If you can add anything to what the others have told me?”

“Very well,” said Anne. “I was out most of Monday. I went to lunch with a friend who was in the W.R.A.F. with me. I got back here about half-past three and went straight upstairs without seeing anybody. My father-in-law generally comes up here and has a drink with me about six o’clock. On Monday he only glanced in, just to tell me that Mrs. Farrington was unwell and had gone to bed. I asked him if there was anything I could do, and he said would I go down and see Madge in the kitchen sometime and tell her he wouldn’t be wanting any supper, as he was waiting for the doctor to come. I didn’t go down immediately, because my husband came m, but I did so about half-past six or a quarter to seven and then came back here to get our own supper. I have a kitchenette on this floor.”

“I see,” said Macdonald. “Did you meet any other member of the household on the stairs or in the hall?”

“I met Paula coming upstairs with her hands full of sherry glasses as I went down, and I saw Joyce in the hall as I came up from the kitchen, She had just come in, and I told her Mrs. Farrington was not well and would she try to prevent the twins making too much noise with their party. Joyce and Philip have the floor above this one, and the twins have the attics, but they do make a shocking lot of noise sometimes.”

“As is the way of the young,” said Macdonald, a halfsmile on his grave face, “Do you remember what time the twins’ party arrived, and who admitted them?”

“The party came about eight, and Peter let them in with his own latchkey. They crept in very quietly—probably he was anxious not to be caught by the old folks—but by the time they got onto the landing above they had all got the giggles, and I heard Joyce go out and tell them to be

quiet. My husband and I were alone up here until after the nine o'clock news, when Coionel Farrington came up and asked me if I would go and sit downstairs, as he wanted to go out for a breath of fresh air; he had been in the house all day. Of course I said I would go down at once and would sit with the drawing-room door open, so that I should hear if my mother-in-law rang her little bell."

"Did Colonel Farrington tell you that he had given his wife a sleeping tablet?"

Anne hesitated before she replied. Macdonald had been aware from the moment he saw her that she was in a state of tension. She was certainly frightened, and she had not had Madge's training. A nurse is trained to meet all emergencies with a calm face and steady hands, and five years' training has a lasting effect. Anne was keeping still by a visible effort: her lips were dry and her pleasant conversational voice sounded forced. Yet to Macdonald's mind it was Anne who had more poise as a rule, more social flair, more reason to be satisfied with herself than Madge, and self-satisfaction does give a certain sort of poise.

Anne reached out for a cigarette and. lighted it before she replied: "Yes. He did. He said something about not liking dope; he's very old-fashioned, you know. I took my knitting and went downstairs with him and told him not to hurry back. Then I went and made up the drawing-room fire, which had gone low, and sat with the door open."

"How were you sitting—with your back to the door?" "No. I sat with my feet up on the settee, sideways to the door, so that I could see into the hall. I was watching for Madge. You see, Madge is the only one of us who could really tell if Mrs. Farrington was :11 or just fussing. She was very nervous of herself, you know, and was always heading for a crisis over her heart pains."

"Yes. I understand about that. Did you see anybody pass through the hall?"

"Nobody at all. I was a bit worried because I could hear the twins' wireless. They must have had it on very loud. But I knew that if Mrs. Farrington heard it she would ring her bell. Oh. the telephone rang once. The bell is in the hall, but the instrument is just by the settee in the drawing-room.

I snatched the receiver off to stop the bell ringing."

“Who was it calling?”

“A friend of Mrs. Farrington’s, one of those tiresome women who talks interminably. She wanted help with a Primrose League fete and poured out a flood of details which she apparently wanted me to write down. I did start making notes, and then I got impatient and rang off.”

“So that during the time you were telephoning you would not have noticed if anybody passed through the hall?”

“No. I suppose I shouldn’t.”

“Did you write down the number of the telephone caller?”

“No. I think she said her name was Jones, but it didn’t convey anything to me. After that I just sat and knitted until Eddie, Colonel Farrington, came in, soon after ten. He sat and talked to me for a few minutes, and then I went upstairs.”

“While you were talking to him was the drawing-room door open or shut?”

“I think it was shut. He closed it as he came in. I said, ‘It’s all right. She hasn’t rung for anything, so she must be asleep,’ and he said, ‘Good. Nothing like sleep for curing aches and pains.’ ”

“Can you remember if you and he were talking about anything in particular? That is to say, was it a conversation which absorbed your attention, or just trivialities?”

“Nothing very important. I was a bit sleepy. I think I said how much we should miss Madge if she did go to America. She’s been so good about running this house.”

“That I can well believe.” said Macdonald. “Wasn’t her father rather upset about the prospect of her going?”

“No. Not upset. He's the most unselfish person in the world. He always wants all of us to do what is likely to make us happy, and he thought it would be very good for Madge to get away.”

“He struck me as an eminently kindly, unselfish man,” said Macdonald. “When does Miss Madge go to America?”

“I don’t know. You'll have to ask her that yourself,” replied Anne. “I don’t think the date has been settled, but I may be mistaken.”

Macdonald waited for a second or two, his pause being quite deliberate. He was still trying to assess Anne and decide what it was that

kept her nerves aquiver. The Chief Inspector found that the majority of persons he questioned were nervous or excited to start with, but when they found they were not being browbeaten or interrupted the nervousness generally wore off, as though the sound of their own voices and the expression of their own experiences had a calming effect. It was on this account that Macdonald generally encouraged his witnesses to tell their story in their own way. It gave him a better chance to study them and arrive at a rough-and-ready judgment of their characteristics.

Anne put out her cigarette and asked abruptly: “Is that all?”

“No.” replied Macdonald. “Colonel Farrington will have told you the cause of Mrs. Farrington’s death?”

“Yes.”

“His own theory, as you probably know, is that Dr. Baring injected insulin by mistake. For various reasons, that is in the highest degree improbable. Without going into technical reasons, it seems probable that Mrs. Farrington was murdered. It is my duty to ask you if you can tell me of anyone who, in your opinion, had any motive to wish for her death, or any grudge or enmity against her.”

“Of course not,” Anne retorted immediately. “The idea seems ridiculous to me. She was a very harmless old lady, a bit tiresome, perhaps, because she fussed a lot over her health, but she was what you would call a very nice woman: courteous and gracious, and devoted to her children.”

“You were fond of her?” queried Macdonald.

Anne frowned. “I find that question rather offensive,” she replied.

“I’m afraid that an inquiry into suspected murder is often offensive, Mrs. Strange,” replied Macdonald. “I asked you a very simple question. If a person has an affection for another, they can generally give some information about them which may be valuable.”

“I’m afraid I can’t give you much information about her. While I and my husband had many reasons to be grateful to her, I never got on to terms of intimacy with my mother-in-law. She was very set and limited in her outlook and we had very little in common. To put it simply, she rather bored me, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t respect her good qualities.”

“And you know of nobody who had any motive to wish her out of the way?”

“Nobody at all.”

“You would say that it is untrue that Mrs. Farrington had the ability to exasperate everybody in this house except her husband?”

Anne moved jerkily, restlessly. “Did Madge tell you that? If so, she ought to be ashamed of herself.”

“I didn't say that anybody told me. I asked you if it were untrue.”

“In essentials, quite untrue. In a house like this there tend to be small irritations, but to exaggerate them at a time like this is unforgivable.”

“Thank you for answering my questions, Mrs. Strange. I am sorry that you found them painful, but if you think it over you will realise that an inquiry of this nature has to take precedence over people’s feelings. Only one thing matters, and that is to find the truth.”

Anne made no reply, and with a formal bow, Macdonald left her.

2

On the flight of stairs leading from Anne’s floor to the one above. Mrs. Pinks was busy brushing down the stair carpet. Seeing her thus occupied, Macdonald said: “You’ve got

a tidy-sized job there. Do you do the whole lot from top to bottom at one go, or do a flight a day?”

“I do the whole blooming lot, seventy of ’em, bang off. Never did fancy doing jobs by ’alves. I always says if everyone did as they ought in this ’ouse, these stairs’d be done by them what uses them most: one flight Mrs. Tony, one flight Mrs. Philip, one flight the twins, leaving the basement to me. But if you knew the words they’d ’ad, and the complaints they makes, why, you wouldn't believe it. Same with the bathrooms. Always someone else’s fault. I wouldn’t live in this ’ouse, not for any money.”

Mrs. Pinks stood up to let Macdonald pass, adding: “And if you’ve got a minute to spare some time, I’d like a word with you meself.”

“I’ve got plenty of time,’[1] replied Macdonald. “It’s my job to listen to anybody who’s got a word to say.”

“Well, say if we pop up into the box room, along to the right on the next floor. Mrs. Philip’s gone out, and Miss Paula’s still in bed. Never met

such a girl for stopping in bed. Gives me the fair fidgets.”

She led the way along the passage on the second floor to a little room which was used for storing suitcases and trunks, and having closed the door, she turned and faced Macdonald, her skinny arms folded across the bib of her apron.

“You’re a C.I.D. man?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And you’re asking about things because you believe that someone bumped off old Mrs. F.?”

“I’m asking about things because old Mrs. Farrington did not die a natural death, and the doctors can’t give a burial certificate. Will you tell me your name and address and how long you’ve been employed here?”

“Mrs. Pinks—109A Culworth Buildings, N.W. I been here three years. Miss Madge engaged me. She heard of me from Mrs. Baines, wife of one of the painters they ’ad working ’ere. You’d better get this straight. I’d been in trouble, see. I worked in Polton’s, one o’ them chain stores. Me ’usband was sick and I couldn't make do with four kids on the insurance money. I was run in for pinching—fruit and that. My Gert ’ad ’ad measles and me old man couldn’t eat the usual, and fruit was perishin’ dear. So I pinched them some grapes and that. Got bound over. I told Miss Madge the ‘ole story and she said she’d risk it, and I worked for ’er three years. And if ever there’s a Christian, it’s Miss Madge. She's been proper decent to me, and I'll never forget it.”

“Well, I’m glad you told me all about that,” said Macdonald. “What’s the matter with your husband?”

“Diabetes.”

“I see,” said Macdonald. “Did Miss Madge tell you what caused her mother’s death?”

“Yes. That's why I came to you. I want you to get this straight. She never done it, not Miss Madge. They’ll all try to put it on her. But she never done it.”

“Why do you say, ‘They'll all try to put it on her’?”

“Because they will. You just wait. Not the Colonel. He won’t. He’s a gentleman, and he's fond of Miss Madge. He understands ’er and ’e loves ’er. She’s ’is own child, and ’e knows ’er, same’s ’e knows hisself. I want to

make you *see* what things is like here.” she burst out. It’s only me can tell you. The others won’t.”

“It’s my job to know what things have been like here,” said Macdonald. “So go ahead. Tell me the truth as you’ve seen it. Don’t exaggerate, and don’t repeat what other people have said. Only what you’ve seen yourself.”

He sat down on the ledge of the window sill, and Mrs. Pinks seated herself on an old bedroom chair and began: “When they came back to this ’ouse after the war, Miss Madge ’ad been ill. That’s why she couldn’t go on wiv her nursing. At first it was only Colonel and Mrs. F. Then the twins came ’ome. Then Mr. and Mrs. Strange came. Then young Mr. and Mrs. Duncan, Mrs. Philip we calls 'er. And Miss Madge cooked for the lot of ’em, with me and Milly Pardon doing the ’ouse. Then Milly got married and left only me. Work? I tell you we fair slaved, and never a thank you from no one, only complaints about this, that, and the other. I don’t wonder Miss Madge said some bitter-things. She’s got a tongue and she used it. You see, all them others, Joyce and Tony and Paula and Peter, they was Mrs. F.’s children. All tarred with the same brush. Selfish they is. the whole boiling of them. Won't do a hand’s turn for no one. It was ‘Madge can do this and Madge should do that,’ from morning to night. And old Mrs. F. was the worst of the lot. She liked having them all together for meals—one big ’appy family she called ’em, I don’t think.”

“Do you mean that they quarrelled?” asked Macdonald.

“Bickered, backchat, and that,” said Mrs. Pinks. “The old lady played them off one against the other. First one’d be favourite, then another, but if anything was wrong, always blame Miss Madge. You know ’ow it is with some women when they gets old; they lives on the young, so to speak. Old Mrs. F., she liked ’aving ’em all together; she could keep tabs on ’em, everlasting asking questions an’ prying. Well, at last there’s a proper blow-up. Mrs. Strange say she must ’ave her own kitchenette and do 'er own meals, and then Mrs. Duncan says she'll do ditto, and because they was both afraid of offending the old lady, they blames everything on to Miss Madge and says she’d been that disagreeable they couldn't stand it no longer.”

Macdonald listened with lively interest to Mrs. Pinks’ vigorous cockney speech. Even allowing for the charwoman’s obvious devotion to

Madge, she yet gave a good picture of the resentments which had animated the family living in this dignified house.

“It’s rather surprising that Miss Madge put up with things for so long,” he said. “She seems a very competent person. She could have got many an easier job elsewhere.”

“If I told ’er so once, I told ’er an ’undred times,” said Mrs. Pinks. “She’s a tiptop cook, a good manager, and she’s easy to work under. She didn’t want to go away because of ’er dad. She’s real fond of ’er dad, and I don’t wonder, because a kinder man never lived. But she’d got just about fed-up, and I reckon she’d’ve chucked it pretty soon. And now what’s ’appened? All this to-do about the old lady, and Miss Madge says she can’t leave ’er dad. And them others whispering together. Oh, it makes me that mad, I know what they’re getting at. Blame Miss Madge. The same old story. Don't you listen to ’em.”

“It’s my business to listen to everybody, and to sort out the truth from the falsehood,” said Macdonald quietly. “Now here's a plain question. If Mrs. Farrington was killed, have you any idea who killed her?”

Mrs. Pinks twisted her apron round and round her work' worn hands. “You call it a plain question,” she said slowly. “I reckon it’s an horrible question. I'm not one o’ those to go calling other folks murderers light’earted like. It’s a shocking thing to point at someone and say they killed their own mother.”

“You’re perfectly right. It’s a shocking thing,” replied Macdonald gravely; “but if you know anything, it’s your duty to tell it. It’s my business to find out if what you tell me is true, and if it means what you think it means.”

“Well, that’s straight,” she said slowly. “There’s something about you I can trust, so I’ll tell you what I knows and you can sort it out. But I’m not saving she did it. I got daughters of me own, and I’d never say a thing like that.” She gave her thumb an upward jerk. “That Miss Paula, you knows of her? Had a party on Monday night and borrowed the sherry glasses. Locked up, them glasses is. The old lady always locked things up. Miss Paula got the key somehow; I reckon she pinched it when her ma wasn’t looking. Mrs. F. wouldn’t never ’ave let the twins ’ave them sherry glasses. Well, the next morning the glasses was back in the cabinet, some of them. Reckon the others got smashed. And the cabinet was locked. Miss Madge asks Paula

where she put the key after she'd put the glasses back, and Paula says, 'You've got the key. I left it on the kitchen table.' Now that's a lie. Paula didn't get dressed till after nine, and I was here before that. And Miss Madge and the Colonel came down here just after six that morning, and the key wasn't on the kitchen table then. I reckon Paula tried to put the key back where she got it from, in the old lady's bedroom. And that room's been locked ever since. You look and see if that key's in the bedroom. Because if it is, I reckon one of them twins put it there after their party, and they say they never went into the bedroom. I know I'm not much of an 'and at telling things, but d'you see what I mean?"

"Yes. I understand. It's important, and I'll see it's cleared up."

"I know it cuts both ways," said Mrs, Pinks sadly: "but that Paula, she's telling lies and trying to put things on Miss Madge, and I won't stand for that. And then there's something else. You know it was old Mrs. F. had the money. The Colonel's not got a bean. It's the twins and Mrs. Philip who want the money. The twins special, because Peter's got his-self into some sort of a mess. You'll find out about that."

"How do you know about it?" asked Macdonald.

"Because they're silly young fools. Up till the day the old lady died Peter'd been going out to work every morning at 'arf-past eight, same's he's done for months. On Tuesday he stayed at home, and Wednesday, too. I told you I do the bathrooms. The bathroom on this floor's a new one, put in when Mrs. Duncan created because she and 'er 'usband 'ad to share with Mrs. Strange. Mrs. Duncan 'as to share with the twins now, and she don't like that, either. But that bathroom's just under Miss Paula's bedroom, and you can hear voices same as if you was in the same room, and I heard Mister Peter saying, M got to have that money somehow and I got to have it quick. Can't you borrow on the will?' and Paula she says, 'I'll see what I can do, but I daren't let anybody know. There's all this fuss over the post-mortem.' I won't swear to them being the exact words, but it's near enough. You find out why them twins needs the money. They've been up to something. That Peter's 'ad a job in a lawyer's office, but i reckon they chucked 'im out and 'e's doing something in the painting line. 'E didn't let on, though— went out at 'arf-past eight regular, as tho' 'e was going to 'is office, but I knew 'e wasn't."

"How' did you know?"

“Common sense. I does his bedroom. The twins ’as the attic floor between them. This past month Peter’s bedroom's been all in a muck with paints and sketches, and ’e’s fixed up that room under the leads as a sort of studio—great enormous sheets ’e’s got up there, and such drawings as you never did see. Indecent I calls ’em, and ’ideous at that.”

3

“Now for a few plain questions,” said Macdonald, "Were you in the kitchen when Mrs. Farrington came down to speak to Miss Madge on Monday morning?”

“I was in the scullery—same thing. I could ’ear all that was said, and I told Miss Madge so afterwards. And I said if she’d got any gump she’d walk out right away. ‘You go up them basement steps with what’s left of the ’ousekeeping money,’ I says. ‘You’ve earned it, if ever a girl did.’ Eight to dinner, if you please, and that .meant soup, bird, and et ceteras; two sweets, savoury, and dessert. And all the washing up afterwards, single’anded. When a girl’s dog-tired. I asks you. She said, ‘No, I won’t*—and I could 'a cheered when I ’ear'd ’er.”

“You mean that she was really angry?”

“No. I don’t. She was quiet, but quite decided. ‘I won’t do it,’ she says. And between you and me, she’d no need. She’d been offered a decent job. and she told her ma so. And the old lady started ’orf on ’er heart-attack line. And then the Colonel comes in and takes madam off upstairs to lie down.” Macdonald, with an inward chuckle, meditated that if ever Mrs. Pinks were put in the witness box she would brighten the dreariest of dreary cases. Shrewd, trenchant, and yet not excessively voluble, she was the type to give a cross-examining counsel a run for his money.

“You came back here on Monday evening?” he inquired-, but his question did not seem to worry Mrs. Pinks at all.

“Yes. I did. I brought Miss Madge some shrimps.”

“And a bunch of daffodils.”

“Oh, that. Fancy ’er telling you that. I do like a nice hunch o’ flowers. She was real down’earted. Just cooked supper for six and no one to eat it.

She told me and my two kids to sit down and polish it orf. And we did, not ’arf. She’s a lovely cook, Miss Madge is. Then I ’elped ’er wash up our plates and off we went ’ome. Saw the doctor's car go off just as we went up the area steps. ’Arf-past seven that was. I ’ad to get back to my old man by eight. I was glad we popped in. Cheered Miss Madge up to see my two tuck into that supper she'd cooked.”

SEVEN

AT THE CLOSE OF HER INTERVIEW with Macdonald, Mrs. Pinks undertook to go upstairs to see if Paula were dressed, “I know she’s up now,” said the charwoman, “because I 'eard the bath water a-running while you and me was talking. That’d be Miss Paula; always likes to ’ave ’er bath just when I cleaned the bathroom, and mucks it all up again. Peter’s not that fond of baths; a real mess, ’e is. Why not come up and see them paintings? I’d like you to see them, just give you an idea.”

Nothing loath, Macdonald followed Mrs. Pinks up a steep narrow stairway which led to the attics, the one-time servants’ quarters of Windermere House. On the small landing at the top of the stairs Mrs. Pinks gestured with an expressive thumb. “That way. The bedrooms is this side.”

Thus encouraged, Macdonald opened a door and found himself in a long room immediately under the rafters. The huge cistern was here, in a wooden casing, and the place was lighted by a long skylight. Against one wall sheets of cartoon paper had been pinned up. On these sheets a lively design had been roughed out consisting of a series of grotesques based on human and feline forms. Macdonald, who had a bowing acquaintance with the eccentricities of modern decor, recognised some merit in the vigour of the design, while understanding the feelings of Mrs. Pinks. The cartoons seemed to him to combine a natural sense of rhythm and form with a deliberate perversion of feeling which was almost base. While he stood there meditating what he felt was the abuse of natural facility—for the design was certainly facile in its flowing lines—the door was pushed open and a girl stood staring at him with apprehensive eyes. Then Mrs. Pinks called to her: “I'd better do Mr. Peter’s room, miss. Wasn't done yesterday.”

The girl turned swiftly. “You can't do it, Mrs. Pinks. He locked it when he went out. He doesn’t want his things to be moved. I’ll do it when he comes in.”

“And when did ’e go out, I’d like to know? I been doing these stairs ever since I ’eard you talking to ’im up here.”

’You haven’t. You were in the box room when he went out. Go and finish your old stairs and don’t fuss.”

Paula was dressed in a plain woollen frock of deep blue, very full and rather long in the skirt, fitting tightly about the bodice and waist. Macdonald thought the frock did two things: it emphasised her youth by displaying her extreme slenderness and brought out some quality for which the word “medieval” flashed through his mind before he had time to analyse it: something not of today. She turned back to him and smiled, and he was almost shocked by the disquiet of her eyes, deep-sunken in their shadowed sockets, at once so young and so old.

“You are Inspector Macdonald? I’m sorry if I’ve kept you waiting. I was dancing last night and didn’t get home till morning. Shall we go downstairs?”

‘Why not stay up here?” inquired Macdonald. “I think it’s rather a good idea to see people against their own background. This is a design for a ballet set, isn’t it?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s only experimental. It’ll never be used. Peter’s never had any training. Do you like ballet?”

“Yes. The first dancer I saw was Nijinsky. That’s a long time ago—long before you were born.”

“Yes, but ballet isn’t a new art.” She stood with her head on one side. “I never thought of a detective liking ballet.” “We’re very ordinary people, Miss Farrington, having likes and dislikes of our own, like everybody else. You know why I am here?”

“Yes. Daddy told me. I’m afraid I don’t know anything about it. I was up here all Monday evening.”

“Shall we sit down?” Macdonald perched himself on an old stool, and Paula sat down on a wooden box. Her full skirts arranged themselves in flowing lines, and against the background of the white paper with the bold red and black lines of the, monstrous cartoon she looked like part of the decor.

“You went in to see your mother when you asked for the key to the glass cabinet,” began Macdonald. “What time was that?”

She replied in a rush, almost breathlessly: ''Oh, quite early. Before the doctor came. She was all right then. I just asked if I might have the key, and

she gave it to me. I didn't stay more than a minute."

"Was your father in the room?"

"No. I think he was telephoning or something. I came straight up here after I'd seen Mother."

"Didn't you go and get the sherry glasses from the cabinet?"

"Oh . . . yes. I did."

"Did you see anybody, in the hall or on the stairs?"

"No. I don't think so. I came straight up here. We were having a party, and I was busy cutting sandwiches and getting things ready."

"How many guests did you have?"

"Four. Two girls and two men. They all dance in the cabaret show I've been in. I have to take what jobs I can get."

"And where did you have your party?"

"In here and in my bedroom. We ate and danced in here and sat in my bedroom in between. It was a birthday party for one of the girls. We would have liked to take them out and do it properly, but it costs too much. And it was more fun up here than downstairs. Mummy didn't like my friends. I suppose they are rather a mixed lot."

"How long did the party go on?"

"Oh . . . rather late. They went between one and two . . . about."

"All together?"

"Yes. I crept down and let them out. We really *did* creep. I made them all take their shoes off, and they didn't put them on again until they got outside. I didn't put the lights on, either. I took a torch."

Paula still talked almost breathlessly, her eyes meeting Macdonald's from time to time in a flickering glance which seemed like an appeal.

"And then?" he asked.

"Oh, I came up here again and went to bed."

"Are you quite sure?" persisted Macdonald. "You do realise, don't you, that this is a very serious matter? I am asking you for evidence, and that evidence must be exact, not casual."

"I know. I've told you just what happened. When we came downstairs the house was dead quiet, not a sound."

“You say you came straight up here again and went to bed. What about the sherry glasses? They were back in the cabinet early next morning.”

“Oh ... I forgot . . . but I got up early and washed them up and put them away. I knew Madge would fuss if I didn’t. She’s an awful fusser.”

“What time was it when you came down in the morning?”

“I don’t know. It was only just getting light. It was before Daddy came up to Madge. I heard him come upstairs.”

“So you went to bed about two o’clock and woke up again before six to do the washing up?”

“No. I didn’t. I don't sleep very well, and I’d been drinking a lot of black coffee. I didn’t go to sleep until after it was light. I often don’t. That’s why I’m so late getting up. I seem to go to sleep when other people wake up.”

“It doesn’t seem a very good idea to me,” said Macdonald; “but let’s get back to Tuesday morning: You say you got up before it was quite light and washed the glasses. Where did you wash them?”

“In the bathroom on the next floor. Then I took them downstairs and put them away and locked the cabinet. After that I went down to the kitchen. I was cold and I thought I could find a hot-water bottle to take back to bed with me, but the one I sometimes borrow wasn’t there, so I went back to bed without it. When I got upstairs again I remembered I’d left the key of the cabinet on the kitchen table, but I was too tired to go downstairs again, so I just thought Madge would find it there. I was just getting sleepy when I heard Madge’s alarm clock go off, and a little later Father came upstairs to her room. I heard his voice. I went downstairs a little later. Madge was telephoning. I asked her what was the matter, but she only snapped at me, and I came upstairs again. I felt simply awful, but there wasn’t anything I could do because Madge was so hateful. Later on I went in and told Anne, and she said I’d better go back to bed because I was cold.

She spoke like an unhappy child, and Macdonald’s mind w[r]as divided between irritation and a realisation that he was sorry for her. He did not believe that she was telling the truth, and she seemed so much too young to be involved in this sorry story.

“Did you see a lot of your mother?” he asked gently, and to his surprise she answered quite composedly:

“Oh, no. We didn’t get on very well. She didn’t understand the sort of world I know. She thought dancing was just pretty-pretty, and I had a tough time before I made her understand I was serious about it. 1 know she meant to be kind, but she just didn’t understand. I can’t think how she ever had children like Peter and me. We were all wrong. It was the war, partly, and we went to a crazy sort of school because it was in the Welsh mountains and so safe. And we just grew different.”

“I think there is often a big gap between children and parents of today,” said Macdonald. “The war, as you say, does account for it in young people of your age. Getting back to your party again, I suppose that in the general movement it was impossible to say that everybody could be accounted for all the time?”

She grasped his meaning immediately. “On. but we were all up here. Nobody went downstairs.”

“Can that be true? You say the party went on from eight o’clock until two. Didn’t people go down to the bathroom, and if so, you wouldn’t have been likely to notice how long they were away, would you? It wasn’t even as though you all stayed in one room.”

“I wish you’d say exactly what you mean.” This time the words were snapped out, in the manner of an angry child. “I suppose you’re suggesting that I, or Peter, could have gone downstairs without being noticed and gone into Mother’s room and jabbed a hypodermic into her while she was asleep.”

“I’m not suggesting anything, Miss Farrington. I am giving you the opportunity to prove that such a thing was impossible if the suggestion *is* made. You have got to realise that someone *did* use a hypodermic on your mother.”

“I do realise it, but it wasn’t done by Peter or by me. I was watching him nearly all the time. Peter gets drunk on about two gins, and I knew I’d got to watch him. And I did watch him. He wasn’t out of any sight long enough to have gone downstairs: you know how many stairs there are up to this floor. Anyway, he didn’t want to go downstairs, in case he met any of the family. They all fuss so when we have a party.”

“And did Peter get drunk?”

“Not really. Only sleepy. Actually he went to bed before they all went home.” She suddenly stood up. “Do you mind if we go downstairs? I’m

frozen, and there isn’t a stove up here. It fused or something.”

“Certainly. Will you just show me which is your room and which is your brother’s?”

“All right.” She went to the door and pointed across the landing. “The first is mine. The second is Peter’s. The last one is a lumber room.”

Paula moved to the stairs and went down a few steps, but Macdonald crossed the little landing and went on past Paula’s bedroom door, which stood open, to the next door. She called to him: “I told you Peter’s door was locked. He often locks it when he goes out. He hates having his things moved about.”

Macdonald bent and looked in the keyhole of the bedroom door. Then he turned a torchlight on it and said: “But this door is locked on the inside. The key is still in the lock.”

2

It never took Macdonald long to make up his mind. While Paula was still calling out, “It isn’t. It can’t be,” the C.I.D. man took a pair of long, slender pliers from his pocket and got them inside the big old-fashioned keyhole and turned the key. Then he said to Paula: “If your brother has gone out, what is there to worry about? Somebody locked this door on the inside. Do you know who is here?”

“Nobody. It’s all a silly mistake. You can't go in—Peter hates people going into his room.”

Macdonald opened the door: the curtains were across the window, but the light which filtered in from the open door showed him the boy’s slack figure lying across the disordered bed. A voice sounded on the stairs—Madge’s voice— cool and sensible: “What the matter, Paula? What are you arguing about?”

Macdonald said: “Stay with your sister; the lad, here, is ill.”

As Madge had done when called into her mother’s bedroom, Macdonald went and pulled the curtains apart swiftly and then came back to the bed. The bey was dressed, his limbs sprawled limply across the bed; he was breathing, but quite unconscious. When Macdonald lifted his hand it

dropped limply back again on the bedclothes. He went and opened the window and leaned out. giving a long, clear whistle, and heard an answer from the street beneath. As he came back to the bed Madge entered the room.

“I’ve taken her down to Anne,” she said as she came up to the bed.

“I’ll get an ambulance,” said Macdonald. “Can you tell what’s the cause of this?”

She stood with her fingers on his pulse and then raised one of the eyelids. “I think it’s drugs. Not insulin again. Oh, God, what possessed him to do it, poor silly boy?”

Macdonald had heard the front-door bell ringing far below, then Mrs. Pinks’ voice was raised in audible protest, and swift footsteps sounded, taking the stairs three at a time. Macdonald went to the door. “Reeves? Good. Ambulance and surgeon. The phone’s in the drawing room on the ground floor. Stay downstairs and bring the men up when they come.”

He went back into the room. “Had you any idea the lad took drugs?” he asked.

Madge took her time in answering. “I don’t know, but I wondered. I hardly ever see him. He’s out a lot, and he doesn’t ever speak to me if he can help it. He’s never had a chance to be a reasonable person.”

“Why not?”

“Mothered to death, almost. He was a delicate child, the second of the twins, always ailing. He never went to school until the war started; too delicate. It was all rot, of course. He’d have been much better at school. At home he just malingered the whole time. Then he was sent to one of those freak schools, with Paula. When be left he was more impossible than ever. Then be began to hate his mother. The Services wouldn’t have him because of his poor physique, and his mother got him a job in a lawyer’s office, which I believe he hates. Anyway, he’s been a neurotic mess for months. I suppose he got in a panic when he heard you were in the house, and this is the result.” Her voice was slow and reflective, a brooding voice. She stood and looked down at the boy lying on the bed, and then her eyes roamed round the littered, untidy room, as though looking for something, and Macdonald watched her in turn.

“You say he began to hate his mother?” he asked. “Why was that?”

“A perfectly natural revulsion from being alternately petted and bullied. He got away from it while he was at school, and when he came back home again he resented it, and eventually it nauseated him. Paula knows much more about him than anybody else, but she won’t tell you anything. She’s always got him out of his messes. She’d do anything for him. She knows if he’s taken to drugs, but she won’t tell you. She’ll probably say I poisoned him.”

3

“Morphia, or one of its derivatives. Where did he get it from?”

The police surgeon cocked an eye at Macdonald, and the latter replied: “It seems likely that it was obtained from the same source as the insulin which killed his mother. It’s my job to check that. It’s yours to tell me if he’s an addict, or if this is an isolated instance. Either way, it’s better for him to be kept under observation for the time being. When you’ve got him away I want to search this room.”

“You have some lively jobs, Chief. And this house looks the very essence of dignified middle-class prosperity.”

Macdonald glanced round the slovenly, littered room; clothes and painting materials, books, papers and paper bags, toilet articles and dirty shoes, modelling clay, charcoal, and drawing inks were strewn in grubby confusion over chairs and chest and table and floor. A half-packed suitcase lay by the bed, piles of torn-up papers were under the bed; the walls were scrawled over with grotesque drawings and the grate was filled with a noxious mess of burnt papers and dirty paint rags.

“The dignified middle-class prosperity seems to have gone haywire,” said Macdonald, “but this room seems to me to be more representative of the minds of the inmates of the house than does the orderliness of the lower floors.”

He broke off as Colonel Farrington appeared at the door. Whatever the Colonel had been about to say, the sight of the room and the boy’s figure on the bed deprived him of speech. He turned mutely to Macdonald.

“He’s not in any danger, sir. Just drugged. I’m having him sent to hospital. The stretcher men will be here any minute.” “But what happened?

Why . . . and who did it?”

“So far as I can tell, he must have doped himself, sir. The door was locked on the inside and the key was still in the lock. The only person who could have locked the door was the boy himself, because the window was latched and nobody could have got out that way. Ah, there’s the ambulance —”

“But surely he could be looked after here—in his own home,” cried the Colonel. “We could move him into another

room, get a nurse; surely you needn’t—”

“He’ll be better in hospital, sir. Now, if you’ll wait outside while the men come up—there’s not too much room in here.” After the stretcher had been carried downstairs, Macdonald left Detective Inspector Reeves in Peter’s bedroom and told Colonel Farrington that he wanted to see Paula again. The Colonel said: “Can I be with you while you talk to her? She’s only a child, and Anne says she seems numbed with the shock of finding Peter like this.”

“I think it would be wiser if you let me talk to her without any of her own family present, sir. If you prefer it, a woman officer can be present. There is a very sensible, kindly woman waiting in the car outside. You see, you naturally regard your daughter as still a child. I know she is young, hut she is old enough to be held responsible for what she says and does.”

“But she hasn’t done anything,” said the old man despairingly. “You have just said that Peter himself must have been responsible for his condition. He had locked himself in that room.”

“Yes, but I think his sister knew what had happened to some extent. I’m sorry, sir, but she has got to answer some questions—or be given the chance of answering some questions.”

4

Paula faced Macdonald with a set face, her lips in a tight line, her eyes dark.

“You told me that your brother had gone out while Mrs. Pinks was talking to me in the box room,” said Macdonald. “Why did you say that?”

“Because I thought he had gone out. I called to him and he didn’t answer. I tried his door and it was locked. He only locks it when he goes out, so I supposed he had gone out.”

“You went to his room and talked to him before you had your bath, after you had been told that a detective was in the house?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Very well. Did you know that he was taking drugs, or that he possessed any drugs?”

“No.”

“Did you know that he was in trouble of any kind, that he had any money troubles or any other worries?”

“He was always hard up, but I was so used to it I didn’t take much notice.”

“Then what was he referring to when he said, ‘I’ve got to have that money and to have it quickly. Can’t you borrow it under the will?’ ”

“He never said anything of the kind.”

Macdonald paused for a moment, and the woman officer, having finished her competent line of shorthand, waited with pencil poised.

“At the moment, you are not on oath,” said Macdonald. “I shall simply ask you to sign a statement of what you have just said. But at some future time you may be asked the same questions when you are on oath in the witness box. Do you understand what perjury is?”

“Yes.”

“Then I advise you to think things over. If it be proved that your brother is in serious financial difficulties—and such things are very easy to prove—no judge or jury will believe that you knew nothing about it. I don't believe it. I realise fully how hard things are for you, but no hard situation is ever simplified by lying about it.”

Paula sat perfectly still and made no answer.

Macdonald went on: “When I first saw you upstairs this morning you said, ‘Shall we go downstairs?’ Later you said, ‘Do you mind if we go downstairs? I’m frozen stiff.’ When I asked which was your brother’s room you said. ‘Peter’s door is locked. He often locks it when he goes out.’ Weren’t you doing your best to get me away from the top floor because you knew your brother had doped himself?”

She made no answer, and Macdonald went on: “Earlier you had said, ‘Peter has gone out.’ Not ‘I think he has gone out.’ Doesn’t he generally speak to you in the morning before he goes out?”

“No. I’m generally asleep when he goes out.”

“Once again, have you any idea he took drugs?”

“No.”

“Then do you believe that someone else drugged him deliberately for their own ends?”

“I don’t know.”

Paula signed her statement later, and the woman officer said to Macdonald: “Of course she did know that her brother had doped himself. If she hadn’t known she would have been bursting with questions. One can always tell when a witness of that type is obstinately telling lies, they’re so utterly unnatural.”

“She hasn’t had much practice, poor child,” said Macdonald. “The boy is her twin, and she’s trying to do her best for him.”

EIGHT

MACDONALD WENT UP TO THE ATTICS again, where Reeves was coping with the disorder of Peter's room.

"I'll lay any money the boy dopes," said Reeves. "That's why his room's in such a filthy muck. It always takes them that way. It's quite a decent room, nicely decorated and furnished, and he's turned it into a fair shambles. Mind what you touch. There are burst tubes of paint all over the show."

"Any sign of drugs?"

"I don't think so, though there's a lot of stuff in bottles which might be anything—powder paint or medium or what not. I'm bunging it all into that case. And there's a hypodermic. Hallo, who's that shouting downstairs? Some chap in a bate. It's always a good sign in our job when somebody starts creating. Shows we're getting somewhere. I don't like these standstill cases."

"It's certainly not Colonel Farrington, and we know it's not Peter Farrington," said Macdonald, his head cocked to one side as he listened to the man's voice which came from a lower floor, "so presumably it's one of the younger husbands —Anthony Strange or Philip Duncan. It sounds as though he's coming up here. Well, you've got enough to do in this room to keep you busy for a bit."

"That's about it," said Reeves. "That char ought to be grateful to me. I'm saving her a packet. Grand old girl she is, too. Didn't half say her bit when I dashed up her stairs with never a by-your-leave."

A sharp knock sounded on the door and Reeves grinned to himself. He always said you could tell the state of a person's nerves by the way they knocked on a door. There was the timorous tap, the blatant bang, the approach apologetic, and the tap proprietary. Reeves judged the present summons to come under the last heading. Macdonald opened the door and found a tall, well-groomed fellow on the landing.

“Chief Inspector Macdonald? My name is Strange. My wife telephoned to me saying that you were here, and I have only just heard the circumstances which brought you here. It’s really imperative that I should give you the facts which I happen to know. If you could come downstairs a moment?”

He spoke very quickly, evidently in considerable agitation, though also making an effort to speak clearly and calmly.

“A civil servant, or I’ll eat my hat,” was Reeves’ reaction to the newcomer. Agitated he might be. but the precision and slight pompousness of the official still sounded through the man’s obvious excitement. He was a good-looking fellow, too, admirably tailored in a dark suit, with an immaculate white collar and wide black tie.

“Certainly, Mr. Strange,” Macdonald was replying in his quiet, deliberate way. “I am glad you came home so promptly. It is a great help to get all the facts as quickly as possible in a case like this.” His steady voice and even speech helped Strange to recover his own aplomb, and as he preceded Macdonald down the stairs he said:

“I realise that, and so few people are capable of being accurate. It’s a thing we’re always up against in my department; I suppose it’s not to be wondered at that everybody in this house seems to have lost their heads today. Come in here, will you?” He led the way into the same sitting room where Macdonald had already seen Anne Strange that morning. Anne herself was standing by the window, and her husband spoke to her as he entered the room.

“I want to speak to the Chief Inspector alone, Anne. It’s much more satisfactory to make an uninterrupted statement, so I will ask you to leave us for the moment.”

“Very well, but I have the right to say that I don’t agree with your explanation, Tony. I don’t think you’re being fair, and I’m sure you're being too hasty in forming a judgment.” Her voice was tense, her face angry, and Macdonald intervened before Tony Strange could reply.

“I am asking everybody in the house for a statement, Mrs. Strange. The facts and the ideas will be analysed later. If you wish to put on record that you disagree with any part of your husband’s statement, you will have an opportunity to do so, but it is more satisfactory to take a statement in the first case without interruption.”

She looked at him steadily and then replied: “All right. It’s only that it’s so easy to suggest something, and so terribly hard to disprove the suggestion.” And with that she walked out of the room.

Tony Strange flushed angrily, and his anger increased his tendency to pompousness. Macdonald would have agreed with Reeves in placing Strange as a civil servant, a man accustomed to exerting authority, in a limited sphere, and quite unaccustomed to contradiction. He was a man in the late thirties, still good-looking and debonair, but tending to adipose, physical and mental. Strange was no sort of fool, but he was in process of getting stereotyped, losing his adaptability. Faced with a situation so far removed from normal conditions as the present one, he was liable to get angry, and anger obscured his judgment.

Macdonald sat down deliberately and then said: “I find it simplest to ask all witnesses for a general statement to begin with, and to get down to particulars later. Now, I take it that you had no idea that Mrs. Farrington's death was caused by anything save heart failure?”

The simple question did its work. It gave Tony Strange a definite point to start on, and bis angry flush subsided as he tackled the question.

“That’s exactly it,” he said. “I knew my mother had a weak heart: I’d known it for years. Baring was a very sound man and had a vast fund of experience to draw on. I talked with him several times, and he stressed the fact that while the condition of her heart was obscure in some respects, he thought that with reasonable care it would last out for many years. I know it’s difficult for a doctor to be absolutely certain in these cases, and when she died in her sleep—well, it was a shock, of course, but one w>as prepared for it to some extent.” As he talked, Strange recovered his self-control and the words came more easily, as though the sound of his own voice reassured him. “When I heard that Scott had asked for a p.m. I thought he was being ultra-conscientious,” he continued. “My mother was not his patient, and Baring had said the heart condition was obscure, so the suggestion of a p.m. seemed explicable enough. I suppose I was very dense, but I thought of it as one of those medical formalities. It never occurred to me that Scott suspected something wrong, and it’s pretty plain now that Madge was not frank with me.” He paused and looked at Macdonald portentously. “You may find it incredible,” he went on, “but nobody thought of calling me when my mother’s death was discovered. The Colonel, of

course, was completely overcome, and the rest of the household being still asleep in bed, Madge had everything in her own hands. The ambulance men had come and gone before I was told my mother was dead, and of course Madge gave out that the autopsy in this case was only a formality—and what reason had I to disbelieve her?"

He paused, and as Macdonald made no comment, he went on: "I just mention these points to explain why I went to my office as usual yesterday and today. And when my wife telephoned to me that you were here and I heard the result of the p.m., I was simply staggered. And then at last I began to think." He leant forward towards Macdonald and lowered his voice. "It's an appalling thing to have to say, but the explanation is plain," he said. "I can practically give you every fact. My half-sister, Madge Farrington, is not responsible for her actions. My mother really knew it, but she refused to take any steps because she said she could manage Madge. Of course it was Madge who killed her."

"You realise that that is a very grave statement to make, Mr. Strange? I can hardly believe you would commit yourself to it without unimpeachable evidence." Macdonald's voice expressed a warning, but Anthony Strange hurried on:

"Of course I realise the gravity of what I am saying. I also realise the gravity of the fact that my mother was deliberately done to death, and in my judgment I can tell you who was responsible." '

"Let's get this clear right away," said Macdonald. "It is your duty to put forward every item of evidence you have, and that evidence will be duly examined. It is generally wiser to leave the matter of accusation to those whose business it is to analyse the evidence. I say this because I have often heard such accusations made on insufficient or conflicting evidence. Now, sir, tor your facts."

Strange paused a moment or so, considering his form of words, and then began: "Some years ago Madge, who is Colonel Farrington's daughter, incidentally ... or do you know the relationships in this household?"

"Yes. I think I know them all, so go straight ahead with your facts," said Macdonald.

"Very good. In 1944 Madge had a severe nervous breakdown. She was under restraint for some months. She was eventually allowed to return

home here because my mother undertook to keep her under observation and to consult with the doctors if it seemed advisable."

"Just a moment, before you go on," said Macdonald. "I shall, of course, get full information from the clinic where Miss Farrington was treated, but my present information suggests that she was discharged as cured. Do you wish to testify that she was not so discharged? It is a very important point."

"My mother told me that she herself undertook to keep Madge under observation—"

"Then what you are telling me is a report of your mother's words, not firsthand information from the doctors at the Stand Barton clinic?"

Strange looked nonplussed for a moment, then he went on: "Yes, I suppose that is correct, but my mother was a most truthful woman and a very conscientious one. I have no hesitation in quoting her as a reliable informant. As I have said, she was most conscientious, and devoted to Madge. My mother kept a confidential report book, in which she entered notes about Madge's condition, mentioning any departure from the normal, any undue excitability, and so forth. She did this because she was too conscientious to trust her own memory. She confided in me about this matter because she felt the burden of responsibility very deeply, but did not wish to distress her husband. Colonel Farrington, being an optimist by nature, believed that Madge was perfectly normal."

Macdonald was wondering whether any well-educated man could be quite as obtuse as Tony Strange appeared to be, or was it the mother-complex over again? Perfectly evenly the C.I.D. man inquired:

"Can you tell me if the notebook of your mother's was sent at regular intervals to the psychiatrists who had treated Miss Farrington?"

"I believe my mother sent reports based on her notes, and she showed the latter to Dr. Baring, who was an old family friend as well as physician."

"I shall be getting the psychiatrist's report on the whole matter," said Macdonald, "but to alter the angle of the inquiry for a moment. Did you, from your own observation of her, believe that Miss Madge Farrington was mentally deranged—prior, that is, to your mother's death?"

"I hardly ever saw her," replied Strange. "She was certainly peculiar in avoiding ordinary family contacts. She preferred to stay in the kitchen. If I

met her on the stairs, she frequently passed me without a word. As I knew she was irritable and excitable, I let it go at that."

"Then how did you know she was irritable and excitable? Because your mother told you so?"

"Everyone in the house told me so. Even my wife, who is the kindest of women, said Madge was intolerable. Everyone agreed on that point and kept out of her way."

"It is your own evidence I am asking for, Mr. Strange. I suggest you keep to those things you have observed yourself and to those facts told you by Mrs. Farrington. The other members of the household must speak for themselves."

"Very well," replied Strange; "but you must realise that I had no opportunity of observing the main facts myself. I wasn't even in the house when the real cause of this tragedy happened. I had the report from my mother, and if I had given it the attention it deserved, this ghastly thing might have been prevented. It was on the Monday morning. My mother went down to the kitchen to speak to Madge. She had already sent Madge a message asking her to come upstairs—my mother found the basement stairs a great effort."

"One moment," put in Macdonald. "I gather that you are reporting a conversation you had with your mother. When did this take place?"

"Between half-past five and six on Monday evening, when I came in. I often went in to see Mother at that time. I met Colonel Farrington in the hall, and he told me he was telephoning to Baring again and that Mother was in bed. I was only with her for a few moments, because talking obviously exhausted her, but she said that Madge had been quite unbalanced. She had told some extraordinary story of a lucrative post she had obtained in America, and my mother had told Madge, very gently and firmly, that it was out of the question for her to go to America. And then Madge threatened her—threatened her quite explicitly."

"Did Mrs. Farrington tell you the nature of the threat, the words used?" asked Macdonald.

"No. My father came back into the room at that moment, and Mother never discussed Madge in his presence. She just added, 'I have written it all down, Tony. You shall see it later,' and Colonel Farrington said it was better

for her not to talk any longer. It was clearly exhausting her. So I left her and went upstairs.”

“Did you mention this conversation to anybody?”

“Yes. I told my wife about it. She said that she thought it probable my mother had exaggerated, as invalids are apt to do, getting things cut of proportion when their judgment is obscured by the pain they are suffering. My own feeling was that I ought to see Madge immediately and decide for myself what steps should be taken, but my wife begged me to do nothing that evening. She stressed the fact that my mother was in bed and her husband was looking after her, and Madge was never difficult when her father was present. I allowed myself to be persuaded, and I cannot blame myself enough. If I had followed my own judgment, this tragedy would never have happened.”

‘‘Don't you think it’s possible that you are jumping to conclusions?” put in Macdonald. “Several people saw Miss Madge during the course of the evening, but none of them suggested that her behaviour was that of a deranged person. Mrs. Pinks, the charwoman, saw Miss Madge, who, according to her account, was perfectly normal.”

Tony Strange gave a snort of exasperation. “And do you regard Mrs. Pinks as an unbiased witness?” he demanded. “Further, do you know' what disease her husband is suffering from?”

“Yes. I do. Mrs. Pinks told me without hesitation that her husband was diabetic. That matter will be inquired into. But would you tell me how *you* knew this last fact?”

“Because Mrs. Pinks told me. I had reason to speak to her on my mother’s behalf one day. I asked the woman if she could not do some evening work to save my mother exertion, and she refused on account of her husband’s health. If you make inquiries, you will find that Madge quite frequently went to the woman’s lodgings. But to get to my last point, which to my judgment clinches the matter. Madge was seen coming out of my mother’s bedroom between two and three o’clock on the morning she died.”

“Who saw her?”

“My wife did. Anne is very unwilling to give evidence on this point, but I have told her that it is her duty to do so, no matter how repugnant it is to her. I will fetch my wife, and you can interrogate her.”

2

As Tony Strange went out of the room, Macdonald asked himself the inevitable question: “How much of this evidence do I believe, how much is objective, ascertainable fact?” The Chief Inspector did believe the story of Mrs. Farrington’s notebook, with its record of Madge’s behaviour. It struck Macdonald as so fantastic that no sensible man would have made it up, and Tony Strange, for all his limitations, was a sensible person in the ordinary meaning of the word. At the same time Macdonald remembered Madge’s steady bearing when he had questioned her, her resolute voice and steady hands. He remembered Dr. Scott’s words, “When I said I couldn’t sign the certificate she never batted an eyelid.’’ In Macdonald’s judgment Madge showed no sign whatever of mental derangement or instability, but she had the most potent of motives for killing Mrs. Farrington if the latter were trying to establish that Madge was mentally unsound. The latter could have left home and got a job, but there would always have hung over her the fear that Mrs. Farrington might approach an employer with veiled hints that her stepdaughter was of unsound mind, and Macdonald knew well enough how' such a hint could jeopardise any hope of regular employment.

A moment later Anne Strange came into the room, her husband following her. Macdonald stood up, saying: “Mrs. Strange, I asked you about the events of last Monday. I did not ask you if you had any evidence to give concerning Monday night. That was an omission which I am now correcting. Did you hear or see any movement in the house on Monday night when you came up here again after talking to Colonel Farrington in the drawing room?”

Anne crossed over to the fireplace and remained standing, ignoring the chair which her husband moved forward for her.

“I could hear the twins and their party when I went to bed.” she said, “but I didn’t think the noise would be heard downstairs. I heard Madge come up to bed just after eleven. Her room is over ours, but she’s always very quiet. I must have gone to sleep just about twelve o’clock. I woke again at five minutes to two. I have a clock with a luminous dial and I always look at it if I wake up in the night. I heard a sound on the stairs and I got up and opened my bedroom door. I guessed it was the twins and their party and I thought I would watch to make sure they didn’t make any noise.

They came down very quietly, without turning the light on. Paula had a torch, and she went first. I couldn't really see the others, not to recognise them again, but I saw them pass, because Paula stood with her torch on the landing to light the next flight."

"Do you remember how many people went downstairs?" asked Macdonald.

"Six," she replied. "Paula went first and Peter was last. I only knew :t was him because of his light corduroy trousers. The two other boys were in dark suits. They went down very quietly—they were actually carrying their shoes—and I heard the front door open. I think Paula and Peter went outside with them for a minute or two, but I couldn't hear a sound. I remember hoping that Paula wouldn't stay out in the cold too long, because she had a low frock on and no wrap—"

"Is all this necessary?" interpolated Tony Strange irritably, and Anne turned on him.

"Yes. It is. You've let me in for this and I'm going through with it, every bit of it. You're trying to put it on to Madge, and I don't believe it. I loathe Madge, but I don't believe she'd murder anybody."

Before Tony could reply, Macdonald spoke trenchantly. "If you could both only realise that what you believe is of no importance to anybody at the present juncture, we should save both time and tempers. It is facts that matter, nothing else. Mrs. Strange is perfectly correct in giving me every detail of fact concerning Monday night; so please go on."

Tony grunted irritably, and Anne went and sat down in a chair by the window' before she continued.

"The twins seemed to be down there a long time," she went on. "They didn't make a sound. I didn't even hear them come in, and then I began to wonder if they'd somehow got shut out. It would have been so like them; they're both as mad as hatters."

Macdonald intervened here. "You say that Paula had a torch when she went downstairs. Did she put it out when she opened the front door?"

"I think she must have done," said Anne. "There's a street lamp just outside the house; it would have been quite light on the front steps. I could see the light from outside shine across the hall when Paula opened the front door, but she must have pulled the door to again almost immediately."

‘‘Where were you standing?”

“By our bedroom door. I couldn’t see right into the hall, only across to the far side of it. I was just going downstairs to see if they’d got shut out when I heard someone on the stairs above our floor. It was the least tiny sound, just the shuffle of a dressing gown or something dragging on the carpet. I knew it must be Madge. She is the only person in this house who ever moves as quietly as that. It couldn’t have been Joyce, because she wears mules, not soft bedroom slippers, and the mules always flip-flop on the stairs. And Joyce has a silk dressing gown which rustles, while Madge wears a tailored woollen dressing gown with a long zip fastener. I heard her go on down the stairs, and I thought she was going down to see what the twins were doing, but she didn't go near the front door. I heard the tiniest sound of a door opening— I think it was Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom door; it was from that side of the hall—and then just as I was going to go back to bed I heard the twins creep upstairs again. There was a noise of some kind, as though somebody had slipped a tiny bit, and I heard Paula whisper, ‘Shut up, Peter—’ ”

Anne suddenly broke off as the door was flung violently open and Paula stood in front of them, white-faced, blackeyed, shaking with rage.

“You’re a liar, Anne! You’re a filthy liar! It’s none of it true. I’ve been listening at the door. Peter didn’t come downstairs at all, and neither did Madge. It was you who came downstairs! I was in the hall when you came down.”

“Paula! You must be crazy!” cried Anne. “You know that’s not true.”

“It *is* true! I wouldn’t have told anybody if you hadn’t started telling lies about Peter and me, but now I *will* tell! You hated Mother. You were always saying you hated her and you’d like to murder her. You said she made a hell of the house. It’s you who did it, you!”

Her voice rose to a scream, and suddenly Madge appeared in the doorway. She went straight to Paula and smacked her face hard with a resounding smack.

“Be quiet and leave off talking nonsense,” she snapped. “If you behave like a hysterical schoolgirl you’ll be treated as one. Be quiet, I say!” And with that she slapped her face again.

Paula seemed to crumple up: tears streamed down her face and she gave a whimper of pain as Madge’s hard hand caught her face. “Now come

and lie on your bed and don’t let’s hear any more of this nonsense,” snapped Madge. “Come along and don’t be such a silly little idiot, throwing hysterics like a half-wit.”

She dragged the weeping girl out of the room, and Tony Strange mopped his face with a large white handkerchief.

“My God!” he said helplessly. “My God! Are they all mad?”

NINE

“BUT WHAT WERE THEY AFTER?” demanded Reeves when Macdonald had given him a brief outline of the statements made by Tony and Anne Strange and of Paula’s hysterical outburst “The old lady must have been in a coma by that time, or about as near dead as makes no difference,” Reeves went on. “Scott reckoned she’d been dead nearly two hours when he examined her, so it’s no use Mr. Strange saying that Madge did the job about two in the morning. Insulin’s a delayed-action killer.”

“The only person in the household who has enough information to realise that fact is Madge herself,” said Macdonald. “If she did this job, she would have known the time death was likely to occur, and she might well have gone downstairs to get Mrs. Farrington’s private notebook. I’m pretty certain we shall find no trace of that notebook.”

Reeves stood and cogitated. The two detectives were talking in Peter’s bedroom—a bedroom now reduced to stark order by the competent Reeves.

“The only evidence you’ve got for the existence of the book is Strange’s own statement, isn’t it?” said Reeves. “He hadn't told anybody else about it?”

“No. He said it was a confidential matter between his mother and himself. Colonel Farrington knew nothing about it, and Dr. Baring isn’t alive to give evidence.”

“Do you reckon Strange is telling the truth, or just trying to put it on Madge, as the old char suggested?” asked Reeves.

“Somehow I do think that Strange was telling the truth about the book,” said Macdonald. “He’s not the type of chap who would risk an improvisation on the spur of the moment. I’m pretty sure of that. If he were going to fabricate some sort of story, he'd have planned it out in advance, and to make it more convincing he’d have told his wife in confidence about the notebook, so that there would have been some corroboration.”

“Yes. I reckon you’re right there.” said Reeves. “One thing, this kid Paula seems to have blown the united-family story sky-high. It’s rum how people can get to hate one another when they’re all packed together in one house. If all these folks had had separate houses they’d never have boiled up this hate business. Old Mrs. Farrington ought to have sold this house and gone to live in Eastbourne or Cheltenham with her old man. Nice classy flats in South Ken for the young-married couples, a studio off King’s Road for the twins, and a reformatory matron’s job for Madge, and they’d all have been as right as rain. What d’you make of Madge, Chief? Old Pinks swears she’s good right through, and chars are generally fair judges of the women who boss them.”

“I don’t know, Reeves,” said Macdonald. “I should think Madge was all right to start with, but she’s had a tough time. Any psychologist could tell you that the conditions she’s lived under were enough to drive any woman off the rails.”

“These psychologists!” said Reeves. “Strikes me they get their livings by inventing difficult words to describe the things a plain bloke tumbles to by sheer common sense.”

“That’s what they’re paid for,” said Macdonald. “If you and I were to talk common sense in the witness box, nobody would listen to us, so we get the psychologists to do their patter. But I’m a bit worried about Madge, all the same. She’s being too self-controlled and sensible and competent altogether. Paula blew off steam by having hysterics, Anne Strange flew into a tearing rage, Tony swore at the lot of them, and Madge coped with them all with a sort of hard, cold competence. It would seem more natural if she had hysterics for a change.”

2

Anne, in Macdonald’s presence, had repeated to Madge the evidence she had already given to Macdonald. Madge, white of face but perfectly self-controlled, had cross-examined Anne.

“You say that you knew it was I who came downstairs. Could you see me?”

“No. It was too dark.”

“Then why didn’t you turn the light on? The switch was close by your hand—if you *were* standing by your bedroom door.”

“I didn’t want to wake anybody up.”

“How could it have woken anybody up? We don’t sleep with our bedroom doors open in this house. You say you heard somebody creeping down the stairs when you knew the twins were down in the hall and you didn’t even turn the light on or call Tony. If you’d really believed somebody was on the stairs you’d have done something about it.”

“I thought it was you, Madge. I know the sound you make. I heard you come downstairs last week. It was about twelve o’clock. I had just opened my door to go to the bathroom.”

Madge had turned to Macdonald. “Anne seems to think I play at being Lady Macbeth. After I’ve finished my day’s work in this house I’m quite tired enough without trapesing up and down stairs for exercise. I did *not* come down at twelve o’clock a week ago. I did *not* come downstairs last night, and if Anne had thought I did she would have told Tony about it straight away. And if she thought the twins were fooling about in the hall she would have turned the light on to see what they were up to, just as I should have done.”

“Why didn’t you turn the light on, Anne?” demanded Tony, and then Anne had wept. It was, as Reeves said, “a jolly old mix-up.” Three different stories. Anne’s, Paula’s, and Madge’s.

When Macdonald opened the locked door of Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom he stood and considered the room. It was perfectly tidy. The bedclothes had been taken away, and the handsome old-fashioned double bed with its box-spring mattress was bare and immaculate. There was a fine rosewood suite—dressing table, tallboy, wardrobe, and cheval glass. A small Chippendale table stood beside the bed, fitted with a plate-glass top. Here lay a Bible and prayer book and a suede-covered booklet of devotional verse; there was a shaded hand lamp and a small wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Inside the box were some keys, a gold chain with a pencil on it, a box of matches, a locket with a miniature portrait of an elderly woman, and some rings.

Macdonald stood still while Reeves powdered the box for fingerprints.

“No go. Only smears. It’s been rubbed, or else handled with gloves on,” said Reeves.

Macdonald looked at the keys and then glanced round the room.

“The safe’s in the corner there, under that chintz curtain,” said Reeves. “Here you are. Burglar’s delight. Funny the way these old dames dote on them.”

Macdonald took one of the keys and unlocked the small safe. In it were some jewel cases, some silver cups, and various papers.

“The notebook’s not there. I wonder where she kept it,” said Reeves. “Must have been in this room. She’d never have risked leaving it in the drawing room. There’s a drawer in that bedside table; might be in that. The drawer’s locked.”

“It might have been kept there, but I’m quite sure it’s not there now,” said Macdonald. He was taking the papers out of the safe, using a pair of forceps, while Reeves opened the locked drawer with a skeleton key.

“No notebook, only the old lady’s handbag, bungfull of letters and what nots. It’s amazing the way these dames carry their bags round chock-full of what-have-yous. I always tell my missis she puts everything in her bag bar the kitchen range. What have you got amongst your lot, Chief?”

“The documents you would expect a businesslike woman to keep. ‘Copy of my Will. Original with lawyers.’ Copies of deeds, list of personal jewellery. That’s the one that’s going to interest us, I fancy.”

He spread out the typed sheet on the top of the chest of drawers, and Reeves came over to look at it.

“You reckon somebody’s pinched something?” he inquired.

Macdonald nodded. “That’s my guess. It’s likely that several people in this house have uneasy consciences, but the twins, being young and inexperienced, are less able to conceal their uneasiness, or even to clamp it down with a pretence that nobody will be able to prove anything. I think the sequence followed this pattern. Paula came in to see her mother about six on Monday evening, ostensibly to ask for the key of the glass cabinet. Being quick-witted and nimblefingered, she managed to get the key of the safe at the same time. If her mother had missed it during the course of the evening, Paula could easily have come down and pretended to find it on the floor. At two o’clock, when the party left, Paula came in here, crept across to the safe with her torch, and helped herself to something of value. At least that’s my guess.”

Reeves nodded. “Could be, Chief. The old man told several people he’d given his wife a sleeping tablet, and Paula seems to know all about listening at keyholes.”

“We’d better check up and see if anything’s missing before we get any farther ahead of ourselves,” said Macdonald. “I’ll shift the cases with forceps, and you can test them for dabs as we go.”

“Right, but she’d’ve worn gloves,” said Reeves. “That’s one of the things these youngsters would be certain to remember.”

3

“Well, that conforms to expectations,” said Macdonald after they had checked the jewellery in the cases against the list. “There’s one diamond ring missing, valued at £250, and one diamond brooch, valued at £200. They are the most valuable items, and the easiest to raise money on. There’s always a market for diamonds. Those pearls cost a lot of money, but there’s no sale for pearls today according to the jewellers.”

“I wonder where she sold them,” pondered Reeves, and Macdonald replied:

“I doubt if she’s tried to sell them. Scott’s demand for a p.m. would have been a red light. She wouldn’t have risked it. Also, if Mrs. Pinks is telling the truth, Peter still needs the money to get him out of whatever jam it is he’s in. I’ve put Jenkins on to that. I think it’s probable that Paula took the rings, while Peter kept cave outside the door. So Peter knows all about it, and when he heard that the C.I.D. had turned up this morning he panicked and tried to finish himself off with morphia. At least that makes as reasonable an explanation as anything else.”

“O.K.,” said Reeves; “but let’s see if we can straighten out this story about half the family being on the stairs at two o’clock in the morning. Can we make sense of it?”

Macdonald sat down on the edge of the well-sprung bed, and Reeves took Mrs. Farrington’s comfortable dressing stool.

“One thing’s perfectly plain. The twins had to conduct their party out of the house,” said Macdonald. “Paula and Anne both told the same story

about that. Paula carried a torch, and they all crept downstairs without their shoes on. I think this extreme caution was used to avoid waking up any other member of the household. Anne said she saw a light shine across the hall when the front door was opened, and Paula says she went outside with her guests. That's also quite probable, to ensure that they didn't make any noise on the steps. Then I should guess that Paula slipped inside again and came into this room and crept across to the safe with her torch, unlocked it, took the two cases she wanted, locked the safe again, put back the key in the box, and crept out. How long would that have taken her. Reeves? Try it out. Remember she's a dancer and therefore neat on her feet. She had no shoes on, and I think she'd have walked across the room, not crawled."

Reeves went promptly to the door. "She'd have stood still and listened to the old lady's breathing to make sure she was asleep. Say two seconds," he said. "Across the room to the safe . . . twelve steps . . . I make it ten seconds. She could have risked putting on her torch to make sure the way was clear. Unlock the safe . . . pick up the two cases . . . they were all laid out easy to see. Lock the safe . . . I could do all that in twenty seconds. Back across the room, another ten seconds, plus five for putting the key of that safe in the box. That's forty-seven seconds. Even if you double the time I took, that's only about a minute and a half. All that's plain sailing, but what about the other dame who came downstairs? Or is that just one of those stories?"

"I don't know," said Macdonald. "Our theory at present is that Peter kept watch in the hall. There's a possibility that Paula risked coming in here while Peter was seeing the party off on the doorstep. If that's correct, the second woman could have come downstairs and gone into the drawing room or else down to the kitchen without realising that the twins were still downstairs, and then the twins went upstairs again, as Anne suggested."

"It all depends on who you're going to believe, if anybody," said Reeves. "They all sound a bit phony. Why didn't Mrs. Strange tell her husband that Madge had been creeping around at night? Why didn't Paula ask Anne next morning what she'd been doing in Mrs. Farrington's room?"

"I think you've got to bear this in mind," said Macdonald. "They were all frightened next morning. It's probable that if Paula came into this room at two o'clock on the Monday night, she realised her mother was in a bad way. That would account for why she listened on the landing when Scott

came next morning. When Scott demanded a p.m., Madge was frightened, too. Whether she's guilty or not, she'd have realised that she was in for trouble. I'm willing to believe that Anne didn't turn the light up or speak to her husband at two o'clock in the morning because he's probably very bad-tempered if he's woken up unnecessarily, and when morning came and she heard what had happened she w'as frightened, too, and determined to keep quiet and hope for the best. You know and I know that people who are frightened often tell lies, Reeves."

Reeves chuckled. "You're telling me. Sometime in this case a psychologist wallah's going to explain to you and me how fear develops a defence mechanism and the subject will overcompensate by inventing symbols. I pass the fear business all right, but I always like to know just what they're afraid of. Paula probably pinched the doings, so she's very good reason to be in a blue funk. Madge may have pinched the qualified notebook, and anyway, she threatened the old lady, and she knows that we know that she knows all about insulin; it's plain enough-she's got enough to rattle her. But why has Anne Strange got the jitters, too?"

"Because she not only hated Mrs. Farrington, she'd let other people know she'd hated her, and she was about on the stairs during the night, to say nothing of being left in charge of deceased earlier in the evening. Anne Strange was on this floor, by herself as far as we know, for a whole hour on Monday evening."

"And come to think of it, that's probably when the job was done, during that hour," mused Reeves.

"And during that hour Madge says she was walking round the Inner Circle and Paula says she was busy with her party upstairs," said Macdonald. "Well, having chewed it over a bit, we'd better get on."

"Read the will next," said Reeves cheerfully. "I'm a great believer in wills. Hate's a motive and fear's a motive, but greed's stronger than either. The bloke who chalked up greed among the seven deadly sins knew his stuff."

Mrs. Farrington's will was a very straightforward affair. Windermere House and its contents was left to Tony Strange; the income from the invested capital, which was assessed by Macdonald at £2,000 a year, was left to Colonel Farrington for his lifetime, thereafter to be divided among Tony, Joyce, Paula, and Peter. The jewellery was divided between Paula and Joyce. Madge's name was not mentioned.

"Ungrateful old devil," said Reeves, commenting on this omission. "Madge has worked like a slavey in this house and doesn't even get a thank-you. I hope her pa lives long enough to save her a nice little bit."

"The missing diamonds are left to Joyce," observed Macdonald.

"She's the one who hasn't showed up yet," said Reeves. "Perhaps she had the bright idea of pinching them first and claiming the insurance afterwards. Double value from dear departed. Now what about this notebook? I'd better go through all the doings."

Reeves began to search the drawers in his neat, methodical way, while Macdonald examined the other keys in the bedside box. "One of these will be the key of the glass cabinet which Paula said she left on the kitchen table," he said. "The others may be keys of the bureau and cabinets in the drawing room. I'll go along there and have a look."

There were five rooms altogether on the ground floor of Windermere House. As you entered by the front door the drawing room was on the right, a fine room which ran from back to front of the house, having french windows at the garden end. On the other side of the hall the rooms had been altered to meet the requirements of a flat. Mrs. Farrington's bedroom, in the front of the house, was the original dining room, but a portion had been cut off its farther end and utilised as a dressing room and bathroom. In the rear of the house on this side were the present dining room and the tiny sitting room of Colonel Farrington's. This arrangement was evidently made for Mrs. Farrington's satisfaction. It had given her a magnificent drawing room, a handsome bedroom, and a fair-sized dining room, all very handsomely furnished. In addition were the Colonel's tiny dressing room, with a compactom cupboard and camp bed, the bathroom with two doors, one of which opened from Mrs. Farrington's bedroom, and the little "study." The old service lift, which Madge had mentioned, came up from the kitchen to a hatch at the back of the hall. Under the main stairs were a cloakroom and lavatory and the door to the basement stairs.

Macdonald, considering Anne's narrative about the person who had come downstairs on Monday night observed that there were plenty of places of concealment on the ground floor: the cloakroom, the bathroom, the drawing room, the study, and the basement stairs were all available.

Macdonald went into the drawing room. The glass cabinet stood at its farther end; it was a beautiful bow-fronted piece of eighteenth-century craftsmanship, almost worthy of a place in a museum. It had doubtless once stood in the dining room and been moved when the house was altered on account of its size. In it stood the glass of a past period: wide, flat champagne glasses, "balloon" glasses for brandy, tall, slender hock glasses, squat Georgian tumblers and "pony glasses," ruby-red claret glasses, sherry and port glasses, a gleaming array of English cut glass. On the lower shelves were finger bowls and rose bowls, decanters and jugs. Standing considering this exhibit, Macdonald's long, lean face looked slightly saturnine. He was thinking of Madge's comment, "When Mother said dinner she meant dinner, with all the family silver." Doubtless the family glass, too. Four or five glasses to each cover, to be washed up by Madge after dinner was cleared away. He remembered, too, Mrs. Pinks' comment: "Her ma would never have let Paula have those sherry glasses." Macdonald was disposed to believe this. The collection in the cabinet was much too valuable to be trusted to the twins.

One of the keys from the bedside box unlocked the glass cabinet, and while Macdonald stood pondering, Colonel Farrington came in. His face was weary and very grey, but he faced Macdonald with the same resolute quietness and courtesy he had shown throughout.

"I am ashamed to think of the impression my family must have made on you, Chief Inspector. I have realised for a long time that the twins were making poor use of their lives, but it never occurred to me that they would panic in the manner they have done. I have been deeply shocked by their irresponsible behaviour, and I can only suppose that they are affected by the wartime upheaval of their childhood."

The formal, rather stilted utterance was quite unlike the friendly simplicity with which the old man had spoken to Macdonald that morning, but the latter replied without any sound of officialdom in his voice: "Any investigation of this kind is a strain on people's nerves, sir. That is particularly true when they have something to conceal, and I think your

twins have got quite a lot they are trying to conceal. Whatever they may be, their secrets have got to be uncovered. If their actions are not germane to any investigation by my department, they will not be entered as evidence. Bearing that in mind, would you be willing to "talk about the twins? it may be that we shall be able to clear away a few misunderstandings between us.”

Colonel Farrington’s face suddenly lightened. “Willing? I should be only too thankful, Chief Inspector. I have been nearly distracted by the thought of these two foolish children incriminating themselves by their own stupidity. I’m their father; I’m responsible for them. Ask anything you like about them. I w ill tell you the truth as far as lies in my power.”

TEN

“SO YOU SEE THAT’S THE GENERAL OUTLINE of their lives,” said Colonel Farrington. “In 1930, when they were born, I was aged forty-eight, their mother forty-three, rather an elderly couple to have twin babies. As I have admitted, they were spoilt children, indulged and encouraged in everything. When war broke out in ’39, our one thought was to ensure their safety, and my wife sent them to this school in Wales.'It wasn’t until years later that I fully realised the sort of freak establishment that school was: not so bad for Paula, perhaps, hut for Peter quite demoralising. When I was demobilised in ’45 I wanted to get Peter into a public school, but no headmaster would take him. We paid for extra coaching and finally sent him to a crammer’s—the boy was incredibly ignorant. It was when he was nearly eighteen that my wife realised what a mistake she had made about his education, and she did her best to rectify it. She put a stop to his painting and got him a job with John Swinson, a solicitor friend. I think Swinson kept him out of regard for Muriel, but it was no good. I always realised it was no good. Peter turned the 10b up about a month ago. Muriel never knew he had left.”

He broke off for a moment and then went on: “You may well think I was at fault in keeping this fact from my wife, but Peter came to me and begged to be allowed a chance to do the only thing he wanted to do—to paint. Paula had got him a job, designing stage sets, and she said, ‘If he can only make a success of it, Mother won’t mind. Let him have a month or so and see if he can do anything worth while.’ She actually gave him pocket money out of her own earnings, and I let him have what I could manage. I hoped he would pull up and begin to work hard—a thing he’d never previously done. But I’m afraid he got into bad company and worse habits. Only I’ll swear to this, Chief Inspector. The boy’s *not* fundamentally bad, he’s *not* vicious. He’s weak and foolish and cowardly, but not a bad lot. And Paula has been trying to fight his battles, lying for him. I admit with shame she has always lied for him.”

His voice broke off, and Macdonald said: “I think I can understand the problem, sir, so we’ll leave it at that. Now, did you know that Peter had got himself into financial difficulties?”

“No. I did not. I could tell from the way he avoided me, and the fellows I've seen him with, that he was deteriorating rather than improving, but I did not know he was in difficulties of that sort. I am responsible for him, Chief Inspector, and I’m not trying to shelve that responsibility. I’ll face up to it, whatever it is, so please tell me the plain facts.”

“I’m not in a position to do so, sir, but I will tell you one plain fact which has emerged from our investigation today. Two of Mrs. Farrington’s most valuable pieces of jewellery are missing, and my own belief is that Paula took them from her safe on Monday night.”

Colonel Farrington looked thunderstruck. “I *can't* believe it! I *won't* believe it!” he cried. “The child would never have dared. She would have known they would be missed almost at once. Besides, they were locked in the safe. My wife never parted with her keys, she was the most careful of women. By day she kept the keys in her bag, at night she put them in a box beside her bed, and she was a very light sleeper-”

His voice suddenly stopped, as though his sentence had been cut short as the implication of his words dawned on him. “You can’t believe that!” he cried. “You can’t!”

“I have got no farther than the fact that the jewels are missing, sir, and it seems to me that Paula might have made an opportunity to remove them from the safe,” said Macdonald. “Let us get things as plain as we can. How often would Mrs. Farrington have examined the contents of her safe?”

“Every morning,” replied the Colonel, “and Paula knew it from the time she was a little girl. My wife was most consistent and regular in all her ways. The things in the safe were so arranged that she could see at a glance if anything was missing. She liked to wear her rings in sequence; every evening, when she went to bed, she would take off the rings she had worn during the day and put them in the box by her bed. Every morning she opened the safe, put back some rings and took out others. She then locked the safe and put the key in her bag until the evening. I have never known her depart from that habit; she was the most orderly of women, tidy almost to a fault, and she was very systematic in putting her things away.”

“Thank you. That's quite clear.” said Macdonald. “Now, on Monday evening Paula went to her mother’s room shortly before the doctor came.”

“Yes,” agreed Colonel Farrington. “She asked if she might have the key of the glass cabinet there. I was in my dressing room at the time and the door was ajar, and I heard perfectly clearly what was said.”

“Then will you tell me about it?”

“Certainly. Chief Inspector, certainly! If only the children had the common sense to answer your questions plainly and fully, what a lot of trouble we should have been spared. Paula said she was giving a small sherry party for a friend’s birthday and could she borrow some glasses from the cabinet because Madge would not let her have any from downstairs. That bit about Madge was a diplomatic touch, Chief Inspector, because Madge guards the household goods like a dragon, very wisely, too. Paula pleaded like the spoilt child she is, and her mother said, ‘If I let you have the key, you must promise you’ll only take the plain glasses from the top shelf, and be sure to wash them up again yourself and put them away, so as not to give Madge extra trouble.’ All perfectly sensible and thoughtful. Paula ran away to get ready for her party and I went back to my wife again.”

“Do you know when Paula replaced the key in the box by the bed?” asked Macdonald.

“She didn’t. I put it back there myself.” said Colonel Farrington. “I’ve only just heard there was any fuss or mystery about this key, and I’m afraid it was my fault. When Madge and I realised that my wife was dead on Tuesday morning, Madge took me down to the kitchen to give me a hot drink. I was cold and shaken. The key of the glass cabinet was lying on the kitchen table; it’s a peculiar-shaped key, and I suppose I happened to notice it, in the odd way you do notice trivial details when your mind is half stunned. I picked it up and put it in the pocket of my dressing gown without even noticing what I was doing, and when we went upstairs again—Madge and I—I must have put the key back in that box automatically. And after that, what with Scott’s visit and all the talk about a post-mortem, all thought of the key went right out of my head. I suppose I hadn’t registered what I was doing. Madge did ask me about the key, just casually, and I said I knew nothing about it. That wasn’t a lie, because I didn’t remember. What the deuce did it matter where the key was—a silly trivial matter, I thought

it. It wasn’t until they told me they’d been having an argument about it that I began to think and remembered what I’d done.” With frowning face the Colonel leaned forward towards Macdonald. “You say these jewels have gone. I’m certain that Paula wouldn’t have taken them, but you wouldn’t have made a suggestion of that kind without good reasons, I know. Will you tell me what makes you think it was Paula? It’s possible we can clear it up between us. like this confusion about the key.”

“One of the reasons is that Paula came downstairs to see her guests out of the house, and according to Mrs. Strange, she was on this floor for a much longer time than was necessary.”

“Yes, yes. Anne has been telling me the taradiddle she produced about that point. Of course Paula came downstairs to let her friends out, and very quiet they must have been; I never heard a sound of them. And Paula and Anne both said that the young people came down in their stockinged feet. Now the visitors didn’t put on their shoes again until they were out in the porch, and Paula stayed with them there to make sure they didn’t chatter or giggle, because they were close to Muriel’s bedroom window, and she always slept with her window open at the top. Well, I suppose it takes a minute or two for young people to put on their shoes, what with the straps and buckles these girls fancy, and Anne just exaggerated the time because she was standing there in the dark, silly girl. That’s just a common-sense explanation from an old buffer like me, but I think there’s a point in it.”

'Yes, it’s a perfectly reasonable explanation,” said Macdonald equably; “but there’s still a discrepancy in the two statements. Paula says that Peter did not come downstairs; Mrs. Strange says that he did.”

“I should be disposed to believe Paula on that point, Chief Inspector. Probabilities, you know. Peter’s a noisy, clumsy juggins. His sister would have told him to stay upstairs and not come down kicking up a row when she was trying to be quiet. And as for Anne’s story about hearing someone else come down, you’ve got to remember this. Anne’s a nervy, highly strung girl. I’m very fond of her, but I’m not blind to her small faults. Ever since my wife’s sudden death and Scott’s refusal to sign a certificate, everyone in this house has been living on their nerves. Everyone bar me. I belong to a period when nerves were kept in their place. Grief is one thing: it’s got to be lived through; but nerves are the devil. Anne has been brooding, imagining God knows what, and she went on brooding over the

events of Monday night and began to tell her husband this story of thinking she heard someone else come downstairs when she probably heard the cat chasing a mouse. And Tony pinned her down to chapter and verse, devil take him." The Colonel paused here with a deep snort of indignation. "Well, there it is, Chief Inspector. You know the relationships in this house. Tony's not my son, and I don't see eye to eye with him. Not by a long chalk. I've no doubt he's an excellent chap in his way—but there it is."

Macdonald was much more interested in this exposition than he wished the Colonel to realise, The old man was beginning to express his own opinions. Up till now he had been loyally and steadfastly whitewashing the whole family. Leisurely Macdonald produced his cigarette case, being pretty certain that after all the alarms and agitations of the morning the old man must be longing for a cigarette.

"Oh. thanks very much . . . very good of you," murmured the Colonel. "I'm afraid I'm right out. Muriel used—But I've told you all that before. Thank you, Inspector."

Leaning back easily in his chair, Macdonald began: "You mentioned the relationships in this house, sir, meaning blood relationships. What about social relationships? I imagine that with the best will in the world there are rubs and irritations when a number of diverse people live in fairly close association under one roof?"

"Well, we manage pretty well on the whole." said the Colonel mildly. "I'm willing to admit there have been occasional difficulties, but that's an old story. I used to imagine that when children are brought up together, almost from infancy, they'd be like any other brothers and sisters. But it didn't work out that way. Take Madge and Tony. They never hit it off. Never. They never will. In my opinion it's Tony's fault. He's a self-centred, conceited chap in some ways, though I respect him in many ways. Very businesslike, very competent, and he was devoted to his mother, absolutely devoted, the best son in the world. But he's never been fair to Madge. Some childhood's jealousy at the bottom of it, I dare say, resenting another child occupying his mother's attention. Queer business. Never see much sense in all this psychology business myself. Original sin's nearer the mark."

"Mr. Strange was speaking of Miss Farrington to me just now," put in Macdonald, and the Colonel snorted indignantly.

“Was he? He’d better have held his tongue. He doesn’t know anything about Madge. Never speaks to her. Don’t you set any value on anything Tony says about Madge, Chief Inspector. He’s very misleading.”

“I’m interested to hear you say that, sir. Mr. Strange put forward a theory that Miss Farrington was mentally unstable, quoting his mother as his authority.”

The Colonel’s jaw dropped, then his face became so suffused that Macdonald was almost alarmed. “By God!” he burst out. “Of all the infernal lies! The fellow deserves thrashing. I never heard such poisonous nonsense in my life. Madge unstable? I tell you she’s the sanest, most sensible person in this house. She’s run this house, managed for everybody, kept the accounts, worked as no domestic servant ever worked . . . and you say Tony quoted his mother to support this monstrous assertion? I deny it utterly. My wife confided all her thoughts to me, and if she had had the faintest fear that Madge was not normal she would have told me. I’ll see to it 'that Tony withdraws that slander, Chief Inspector. I’ll go to him now—”

“I shouldn’t do anything of the kind, sir. What you have to say can be more profitably said to me. Now try to look this thing in the face quietly and sensibly, as you have faced the other problems. And if you want my opinion, it is that Miss Farrington is fully responsible, perfectly clearheaded, and has shown no sign of mental instability whatever.”

The Colonel took out his handkerchief and mopped his flushed face. “Thank you. Chief Inspector. You’re right. Getting excited isn’t going to help anybody, not anybody at all. We’ve had too much of it already. I apologise; but it’s a monstrous thing to have said. I know Tony was upset about his mother s death, but he should have known better than to allow his own grief to get the better of his judgment in this way. And it’s a reflection on his mother’s memory, too. I can hardly believe he meant such a thing.”

“He not only meant it, sir. He produced very detailed evidence. He said that Mrs. Farrington kept a private journal detailing Miss Farrington’s mental symptoms.”

The Colonel took a deep breath and made obvious efforts to keep his own resolutions about not being overcome by excitement, but his hand was shaking as he stubbed his cigarette out, At last he said, “And has Tony showed you this alleged journal?”

“No, sir. He said I should find it in Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom. I have not done so.”

“For the very good reason that it never existed,” said the Colonel. “If it had existed, I should have known of it. There is only one explanation. Tony’s own mind has become temporarily unhinged by the shock of his mother’s death. But I find it hard to forgive him. A monstrous lie, monstrous.”

2

Macdonald led the old man away from the topic of Madge, getting him back to the subject of Monday evening. It was then that the Colonel produced a rather unexpected suggestion.

About this story of Anne’s, Chief Inspector. Of course you’ll be seeing the young people who came to Paula’s little party, I know that; but it just occurred to me that one of your point-duty men might have passed this way at the time. If so, he’d have noticed the young people on the steps and might be able to help us. I know it’s only an outside chance, but it might be worth asking. Paula’s a very noticeable child, and the street lamp outside the house does light up our steps quite clearly.”

“Yes. I’ll see to that,” said Macdonald, “also, as you say, the visitors themselves may be able to give some evidence. I’ll also inquire if any taxis passed this way. It’s surprising how often things are noticed in the streets in the small hours, and, as you say, a party of youngsters sitting on the steps putting their shoes on would be likely to attract notice.”

“Then this matter of Muriel’s diamonds,” went on the Colonel. “The fact that they’re missing from the safe doesn’t of necessity mean they’re stolen, does it? My wife sent her jewellery to be cleaned and to have the settings examined at intervals. She was very careful about such things. The jewellers may have them. Joyce may know. She often did odd jobs for her mother, like going to the jewellers and the bank and so forth. You see, all this came on us so suddenly, and Muriel was such a tower of strength in the house that we’re all at sixes and sevens without her.”

“I shall doubtless be seeing Mrs. Duncan and her husband shortly,” said Macdonald.

“Of course, of course. Joyce will be in to luncheon. Now about this astounding rubbish which Tony has been talking, Chief Inspector. I’m ready to be guided by you, but it goes all against the grain to keep silent in the face of such abominable insinuations. After all, I’m responsible in this house until the disposition of the property is settled. The house was my wife’s, and she’s left it to Tony in her will, I know that, but for the moment I’m responsible, and I think I must say a word to him. It’s only fair to Madge.”

“You have the right to decide that matter for yourself, sir,” said Macdonald: “but my advice to you is to leave it alone for the time being. I shall ask for a report from the clinic where your daughter was treated, and, if necessary, call in a psychiatrist. But to quote your own words, getting excited is not going to help anybody, and there has been quite enough agitation already this morning.”

“Agitation,” echoed the Colonel sadly. “We seem to have been behaving in a manner most calculated to persuade you that we are all mentally afflicted. I’m not surprised about Peter and Paula, even though I am deeply shocked. I have feared for some time that Peter was heading for trouble, and Paula has lost her head trying to protect him. Anne was foolish in exaggerating what she imagined she observed, but I consider Tony's behaviour is inexcusable, absolutely inexcusable.”

3

Colonel Farrington left Macdonald alone in the drawing room at last, and the Chief Inspector began to glance through the papers in Mrs. Farrington’s orderly little bureau. It was while he was thus employed that the drawing-room door opened and a tall young woman stood on the threshold staring at him with eyes in which astonishment gave place to something like horror. She was sufficiently like Paula for Macdonald to have no hesitation in assuming that they were sisters. He stood up just as she said, “May I ask who you are, and what you are doing at my mother’s desk?”

“My name is Macdonald. I am the Detective Inspector in charge of the inquiry into Mrs. Farrington’s death. I take it that you are Mrs. Duncan?”

She stared at him with whitening face and darkening eyes and then gasped out one word: “Madge . . .”

Macdonald judged the explanation to be calculated and histrionic. He said quietly: “Will you sit down, please. I have asked for a statement from everybody in the house concerning Monday night—”

“I don’t know anything about it. I was upstairs in my own flat with my husband all Monday evening and night. I didn’t see my mother again after lunch on Monday.”

“Why did you just exclaim ‘Madge’?”

“I don’t know . . . I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t mean to say it.”

“I rather think you did,” replied Macdonald. “Were you implying that Miss Farrington was responsible for your mother’s death?”

“No. Of course not. I don’t even know what killed her. I thought it was heart failure.”

“She was killed by insulin.”

“Oh!” After that small gasp she sat down suddenly. “You mean it was Dr. Baring’s fault? He made a mistake?”

“Dr. Baring could not have been responsible for the injection which caused death. Do you know anything whatever which might throw light on your mother’s death?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Had she any enemies, or do you know of anybody who might have wished for her death?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Would you be prepared to state on oath that there were no personal enmities or resentments in this household?”

Joyce’s large grey-blue eyes opened wide and she stared back at Macdonald in apparent amazement. “Personal enmities?” she echoed. “No. There aren’t any enmities. Occasional irritations perhaps, but no more.”

“Was it irritation which caused you to say ‘Madge’ when you learnt that there was a detective in the house?”

“I don't know what it was. I was startled to see you here, in this room, and horrified when you said that you were a detective. A detective means crime, and such a thought hadn’t occurred to me.”

“But the name Madge occurred to you very quickly. Let me frame the question differently. Have you any reason at all to suppose that Miss Farrington was responsible for bringing about your mother’s death?”

“No. Except that Madge is a bit queer.”

“What do you mean by queer, Mrs. Duncan?”

“She tends to avoid us all and is generally a bit morose and eccentric. I think I’ve always been a bit afraid of her. If anything odd happened in the house, I should think of Madge at once, because she seems unlike the rest of us, but I didn’t mean to imply anything . . . horrible. It’s just that I was startled and the name jumped out before I realised what I was saying.”

“Then I suggest that you should show more responsibility in future when there is a police inquiry,” said Macdonald dryly. “Now about Monday night.”

He took her over the same ground as he had covered with the others, but Joyce refused to commit herself to any statement save that she had not left her own rooms except when she urged Peter to go upstairs quietly when he and his guests came in about eight o’clock. She had seen nothing and heard nothing. At last Macdonald said: “Do you know[f] when your husband will be in?”

“Probably not until this evening. He has been writing a play, and I think he is seeing a possible producer.”

“He is a dramatist by profession?”

“An embryo one,” she replied, with a half-smile and a flicker of her long lashes. “1 think he’s going to be rather good, when he gets started. But he doesn’t know anything more about what happened on Monday night than I do. He never went downstairs at all.”

Finally Macdonald said: “Did your mother ask you to take any of her rings or other jewels to be repaired or cleaned recently?”

She looked startled at that. “Good gracious, no. She never trusted anybody with things like that. She always had a taxi and went to the jewellers herself. She was an awfully careful person, and I’m afraid I’m not.”

“Do you know the name of her jewellers?”

“I’m afraid I don’t. I haven’t a very good memory. And I haven’t any jewellery of my own, so it just wouldn’t interest me.”

ELEVEN

WHILE MACDONALD HAD BEEN TALKING to Colonel Farrington and Joyce Duncan, Reeves had been busy testing for fingerprints in Mrs. Farrington's bedroom. Having photographed all those surfaces where his insufflator had shown up the prints, he began to sort out their most probable originators. As was to be expected, Mrs. Farrington's own prints were the most frequent, and Reeves was able to identify these from the photograph already taken after the autopsy. The frequent prints of a man's fingers Reeves assumed to be those of Colonel Farrington, and an occasional print of very plump fingers he guessed to have been made by Mrs. Pinks. In addition to these he found a few more occasional prints, particularly on the door and window frames, which he was unable to identify and which caused him to ponder considerably. At length he left the bedroom, locking the door behind him, and went upstairs again to the attics. The house was very quiet, but on the second floor he met Madge Farrington, coming downstairs from the top floor as silently as a ghost. She wore her neat white coat, and her face was pale above it with the ugly pallor of a piece of newspaper lying on fresh snow. She met Reeves' eyes deliberately and said:

"If you are going upstairs again, will you be as quiet as you can, please? We've had enough hysterics for one day, and I've just got my sister Paula quiet. Your woman's up there, so you needn't worry." Her low voice was hard and terse, her eyes dark and weary.

Reeves replied: "I needn't go up at all at the moment, Miss Farrington, if you will answer some questions for me."

"I'd rather do anything than have you set Paula off again," she replied; "but someone's got to cook the dinner, so will you come downstairs to the kitchen?"

"Thanks, I will," replied Reeves. "Sorry to be a nuisance, but it's the way things are."

A half-smile lightened the bleakness of her eyes as she glanced at him and preceded him down the stairs.

“What a house,” thought Reeves as he followed her down the steep stairs into the basement and along a stone passage into the kitchen. “Give me a prefab any day, though it’s a nice kitchen.”

As Madge entered it, Mrs. Pinks called out from the scullery: “I’ve done the spuds, Miss Madge, and popped a rice pudding in the oven. I should give ’em soup out of a tin and that there bully you’ve been saving up. And do these ’ere police want me to get on with me work, or not? There's Mister Peter’s room not touched, and Miss Paula’s ditto, and the mess in the top bathroom you’d not believe.”

“Oh, yes, I would.” said Reeves cheerfully. “Mister Peter’s room’s not so bad now. I’ve had a good smack at tidying it.”

Mrs. Pinks emerged from the scullery. “You ’ave, ’ave you? And who’re you, might I ask? Another of ’em?”

“That’s it. You might have been worse off. My mother taught me to be tidy.”

“Well, you’re cheerful, that’s one thing.” said Mrs. Pinks. “It’s bad enough, but you two blokes are much better than some cops I’ve known. Always believe in saying what I think, and what I didn’t say to that there Inspector wasn’t worth saying. Very nice he was about it, too.”

Madge began to laugh. “Mrs. Pinks, this house is just a loony bin. Peter’s doped himself, Paula’s screamed herself asleep, Anne’s having a first-class row with her husband, and Father’s telling the Chief Inspector that his children are the salt of the earth. If you really want some work to do, go and clean all the brass in the hall. Then you won’t have to listen to me answering questions. And get me the mincer out. I’m damn well not going to give Father cold bully beef on top of everything else.”

‘‘That’s sense, that is,” said Reeves cheerfully. “When there’s a spot of bother, food does help. And if Mrs. Pinks cleans the brass in the hall, she can tell the Chief Inspector I’m in the kitchen if he happens to ask.”

“Oke. I’ll tell ’im. The one bright spot, he is,” said Mrs. Pinks. “Here's the mincer. And I’ll just get me Brasso and leave you two to a nice heart-to-heart.”

Madge seized the tin of bully and a tin opener, saying: “I’m late already, so I’m going to get on with it. What do you want to know?”

“Who cleans Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom, please?” asked Reeves.

“Mrs. Pinks. I never touch it. I do the drawing room and the kitchen, and we take turns over the attics,” replied Madge. “Why? Or am I not supposed to ask?”

“I’m sorting out the fingerprints.” replied Reeves. “I thought some of them were Mrs. Pinks’.”

“If you want our fingerprints, you’ll find hers all over that cup she’s just put down by the sink, and my own on the tumbler beside it,” replied Madge calmly.

“Thanks very much,” said Reeves sedately. “Now, you were in Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom on Tuesday morning. weren’t you?”

“Yes, but I don’t think I touched anything, if that’s what you want to know. I opened the door, of course, but several other people did that. I pulled back the curtains and I turned the bedclothes down a little. It was obvious that nothing could be done, so I didn’t mess about.”

“Which was very sensible of you,” replied Reeves.

“On the whole, nurses are taught to be sensible, particularly about corpses,” replied Madge dryly. “The one thing which I am not going to do is to get emotional or het up.

We’ve had quite enough of that sort of thing. Is there anything else you want to know?”

“Yes. Have there been any workmen in Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom in the last week or so? Window cleaner, electrician, gas company’s man, or anybody like that?”

“I haven't ordered anybody to come in, but I don’t know if my stepmother did. I shouldn’t think she did; if anything goes wrong, I am generally the first to be told about it because I have to get it put right. The window cleaner hasn’t been here for three weeks; he’s due again next week.”

“Thanks very much,” said Reeves. “Now I’ll leave you in peace to get on with the mince. I like your Mrs. Pinks. She’s champion, as they say up north.”

“Mrs. Pinks is worth all the other women in this house put together,” said Madge. She left off what she was doing and faced Reeves deliberately. “Whatever else happens, I hope we don’t bring trouble to her, because she has brought nothing but kindness to me. Apart from her, one and all of us

has earned what's coming to us. whatever it may happen to be. We've all been mean and spiteful and hateful in some ways. Mrs. Pinks never has."

"I like the way you said that," observed Reeves. "Contents noted, as they say at the office. It's not strictly my job to be chatty at the moment, but I could never resist playing ball. When you said, 'what's coming to us,' what did you really mean?"

"You should know,' shouldn't you?" she retorted. "But I wasn't thinking about hangings, if that's what you mean. I was thinking about all the small horrors: newspapers, and reporters with their living to earn; neighbours staring and tradesmen nudging each other; one's friends and acquaintances saying, 'I always believed there was something queer about her.' One of the reasons I'm grateful to Mrs. Pinks is that when she goes home and people stop her and try to pump her—as they will—she'll tell them in her own language just where to go."

"She will, with knobs on," replied Reeves. "And she's got neighbours of her own, you know, and so has her old man." , Madge stood very still, looking down at her cooking utensils, an arrested-motion study.

"I'm glad she told the Chief Inspector about her husband's diabetes," she said. "She's got a lot of sense."

"So has he," replied Reeves, "and you don't seem to be lacking, either."

"You won't find that's the general opinion in this house," she retorted tersely, and then went on, almost as though she were thinking aloud: "I suppose situations like this are as commonplace to you as curried beef is to me. You're used to seeing people tying themselves up into knots until their nerves go like fiddlestrings. And then somebody confesses, because they can't stand it any longer. But *if* Mrs. Pinks says she did it, tell her not to be a fool, because she couldn't have." And with that she slapped her tin down on the scrubbed table with a bang.

2

Reeves went up again to the hall, where Mrs. Pinks was busy polishing a great copper urn. She grinned cheerfully at Reeves. "I done this once a

week for three years. A good ’arf hour it takes me. ’Ow long d’you make that altogether?”

“Seventy-eight hours; call it two weeks solid by the end of the month, reckoning a forty-hour week.” replied Reeves promptly, “and nothing to show for it. My wife’d get a pot of lacquer—eighteen pence at the chain stores. Cheaper, y’know.”

Mrs. Pinks chuckled delightedly. “Not ’arf. They pays me two bob an hour. Seventy-eight hours; jiminy, what’s it cost ’em?”

“I make it over seven quid, and that’s not counting insurance,” replied Reeves.

“Sinful waste, isn’t it?” she said. “Never ’ad any common sense, the old lady ’adn’t. Always a-telling me as ’ow she’d ’ad a cook and three good maids to run this ’ouse, and if that wasn’t enough to give a woman like me the proper pip, what was? And fuss, you’d never believe. Three kinds o’ furniture cream and two ditto for the floors. Give me elbow grease and a spot o’ beeswax and turpentine, I told ’er, and didn’t ’arf get a dirty look. Wicked old woman, she v/as, and I’ll say it even tho’ she ’as got ’ers. Nice peaceful death, when all’s said and done. Not that I ’olds wiv that sort of thing.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Reeves. “When you say wicked, what do you mean?”

“When I sez wicked, I means wicked,” she retorted, “and if you’re not old enough to know that some sorts o’ wickedness drives decent folks demented you’ve no business to be where you are. What’s they all been muttering in this ’ouse ever since Tuesday? Madge. That’s what they’ve been saying, all bar the Colonel, and he’s as simple as a child for all he’s the kindest gent God ever made. More’s the pity, maybe. If ‘e’d leathered ’er when she was still capable of learning, this might never’ve ’appened.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Reeves; “but seeing it *has* happened, what about it? Seems to me there’s not much you miss of the goings on.”

“Now don’t you think I’m nosy, because I’m not,” she replied, “and anything I’ve got to say’s been said to your boss, supposing ’e *is* your boss,” she added, with a gesture towards the drawing-room door.

“He’s my boss all right, and I wouldn’t ask for a better,” rejoined Reeves.

“Nice fellow he is, too,” said Mrs. Pinks; “but there’s one thing I might say to you, seeing you’re handy, and what I’d call easy. You’d better keep your eye on them ’ere. There’s going to be trouble.”

“What sort of trouble?” asked Reeves.

“Well, you’ve seen a bit of the goings on today—them twins. You see, they’ve all been in a fair old state ever since Tuesday morning. They pretended it was the old lady’s ’eart; might’ve happened any time, they sez to me. All but Madge. She didn’t say nothing, but she’d the sense to know it wasn’t ’eart they was fussing about. And she didn’t like it. No more did I. And them others are all trying to put it on to Madge. And if they’re bad enough for that, they’re bad enough for anything. So you just watch ’em. And now I’m goin’ down to ’elp in the kitchen, seeing you’ve upset all me work.”

“Sorry and all that,” said Reeves. “It’s just the way things happen. Now can you tell me this. Have there been any workmen on this floor recently, electricians, window cleaners, or so forth?”

“Not any I’ve seen, but I don’t ’ang about on this floor. I do the old lady’s bedroom at nine sharp; did, I mean, before all this. She was punctual, I’ll say that for *er, and Miss Madge, she did the drorin’ room at ’arf-past eight reg’lar, and turnout once a week, me on Monday in the bedroom and ’er on Tuesday the drorin’ room, when the old lady went to ’er ’airdresser’s and was out of the way. But I’d be through with this floor by ’arf-past ten, and then up I’d go to them twins, and a fair waste of time it was, with the mess they made an* all. And I’m not ’ere at all after two o’clock, so I can’t answer for afternoons. Better ask the Colonel. *E’s in ’is study, and Mrs. Duncan’s in there with your boss. And I’ll ’op it before she comes out, if it’s all the same to you. And just you watch out,, see? We’ve *ad enough of it. We don’t want any more, and that’s flat.”

3

When Macdonald left the drawing room he found Reeves in Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom.

“There’s something I don’t quite cotton on to here, Chief,” said Reeves. He showed Macdonald the fingerprints he had “brought up” on the

window frame and door, “That’s a man’s prints. Fairly big chap, too. They’re not the Colonel’s. They’re too big for Strange. I noticed his hands —long and thin. What about this other bloke. Duncan?”

“He’s still out—but I doubt if these will be his prints,” replied Macdonald. “They’re more like the prints of a chap who works with his hands—wide and flattened.”

“That’s what I think. But according to all accounts, there haven’t been any workmen in the house lately. What have we got here? The ready-made explanation?”

“Prefabricated.” said Macdonald. “Got them all photographed?”

Reeves nodded. “And most of the family’s, too. They’re easy to sort out. I got the twins’ from the attics, the Colonel’s from his dressing room, Miss Farrington’s and Mrs. Pinks’ from the kitchen, both sets volunteered.”

“You can get Mrs. Duncan’s from the drawing room; the chair she was sitting in had polished wooden arms,” said Macdonald, “and you can go up and ask the Stranges if they object to having theirs taken. Their reaction to the request may be more informative than the prints, but we’d better get them all sorted out.”

Reeves nodded. ‘*Mrs. Pinks cleaned this room at nine o’clock every morning,” he said. “From what I’ve seen of her, she’s a good worker. Very thorough.”

“Then this room was cleaned on Monday morning,” said Macdonald. “At eleven o’clock Mrs. Farrington went down to the kitchen to see Madge. Half an hour later she came back here to lie down, and here she stayed until her body was carried out the next morning. If Mrs. Pinks does do her work properly, there’s not much time for those extra prints to have been made.”

Reeves nodded. “Mrs. Pinks cleans Peter’s room. We know the sort of muck it was in, but there wasn’t any old dust, if you take me. You can always tell the careless cleaner: they leave dust all along the wainscot, and on the moulding of the doors and along window ledges. She doesn’t do that. Also, it’s worth remembering Mrs. -Thing was a proper fusser. Three sorts of furniture polish, and two other sorts for the floors. She’d never have stayed quiet in bed all day if she could have seen dust and smuts on the window ledge. Look at them now.”

Macdonald looked, and nodded. “You do pick up the chirp and chat of an establishment faster than any chap I know,” he replied. “I think you’ve

got a point there. I'll go and ask the Colonel what his wife did when she got up on Monday morning. It'll cheer him up. He loves concrete questions and he's very good at answering them."

"O.K., Chief. I'll go up and see the Stranges. I have a feeling he won't oblige. Too much red tape in his composition. Not like Miss Madge. She's got a lot of common sense, she has."

"I quite agree," said Macdonald. "Incidentally, the Colonel denies categorically that his wife ever kept a notebook about Madge's symptoms."

"Does he? That's interesting. Who's the liar? The old lady herself? Might be. Mrs. Pinks says she was a wicked woman, and Mrs. P.'s a good old trout."

"Maybe. Maybe not," rejoined Macdonald. "The difficulty in this house is to get an unbiased opinion. Mrs. Pinks is Madge's devoted adherent, and vice versa. Tony hates Madge, and he's all out to prove she's both guilty and mentally unsound. Mrs. Tony also hates Madge, though she's careful not to display the fact, and Mrs. Duncan muttered 'Madge' with appropriate melodrama as soon as she got the chance. Paula is in such a state that it's no use relying on anything she says at all."

"According to Mrs. P., the whole boiling of them have been jittering themselves up ever since Tuesday," said Reeves, "and by general agreement, Madge is the safest bet for their money. Well, I'll go and see the civil servant and test his reactions."

4

Macdonald went to Colonel Farrington's study and found the latter busy writing letters.

"It's a very simple matter, sir," said Macdonald. "We always check up on fingerprints, as you know. Can you tell me exactly who could have been in Mrs. Farrington's bedroom on Monday morning?"

"Yes, I think I should be able to tell you that," agreed the Colonel. "We were very regular in our habits, y'know, a real old-fashioned pair. We had breakfast at eight-thirty, in the dining room. There was nobody in the bedroom between then and nine o'clock, when Mrs. Pinks came. Mrs. Pinks

always does our bedroom/ the bathroom, and my dressing room. My wife used to say that she—the charwoman—was one of the most thorough cleaners she'd ever had. A most conscientious woman she is, never neglects a thing. Now, Monday—yes, it was the day when the bedroom had its weekly turnout, so Mrs. Pinks would have spent longer on it than usual, well over an hour. So she would have been in the bedroom until after ten. My wife always went and had a word with Mrs. Pinks in the bedroom after breakfast—say about nine-fifteen—and then Muriel went to the drawing room to answer any letters and to do a little telephoning. Ever since her heart gave her trouble and she couldn't get about very easily, she depended a lot on the telephone to keep contact with her friends. Let me think, now. Yes, on Monday she was in the drawing room until Mrs. Pinks had finished the bedroom. I remember that now, because I wanted to go to the phone myself. When Mrs. Pinks had finished, my wife went straight into the bedroom to see that everything was satisfactory, and she stayed there, tidying drawers and so forth, until I went in there myself to see about my shoes—repairing, you know. So we were both of us in the bedroom until Muriel went down to the kitchen to have a word with Madge about her birthday party, and I followed her there in about twenty minutes' time. It was then that I noticed how ill Muriel looked, and I persuaded her to come and lie on her bed. So now you have the answer to your question: The only people who were in the bedroom on Monday morning were my wife, myself, and Mrs. Pinks. That holds for most of the day, until after tea, when Tony looked in to see her, and Paula, and later on, of course, Baring was there. Nobody else at all. Oh, except Madge, who just looked in at eleven o'clock at night."

"Thank you, sir. That is admirably clear," said Macdonald.

"And if you want to take our fingerprints, Chief Inspector, of course we shall all be ready to co-operate. I know it's part of your routine and I have no feelings in the matter at all."

"Thank you, sir. My colleague, Reeves, is dealing with prints. He will ask you if need arises. Another point. Were you in the bedroom when your wife's body was moved by the stretcher men?"

"I was," rejoined the Colonel quietly. "Scott was with me all the time. Quite rightly. He was very kind."

“I’m sure he was, and I am sorry to take you back to painful memories, but can you remember just how the men moved about the room? Did any of them open the window?”

“No. I don’t mind talking to you about it, Chief Inspector. You have your duty to do, and no one could have been more considerate than you have. Then there’s this to it. After the initial shock, and it *was* a shock, I think the philosophy of a lifetime comes to one’s aid. We all have to die. I’m an old man, and my own call will come in due course. There’s nothing to fear in death. That’s how I see it. Now about the stretcher men. They were very quick and very skilful. They took the stretcher to the bed, lifted the body, .covered it, and carried it straight out. They didn’t cross the room to the window. and to the best of my recollection, they touched nothing at all—none of the furniture, that is. Madge stripped the bed. Scott closed the window, using the cord for that purpose. He latched it. I think he took away certain things. After that the room was locked and sealed until you opened it today.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Macdonald quietly.

The Colonel rumpled up his grey hair, as though thinking hard, and Macdonald waited. Then the old man said: “I’ve been thinking over what you said about me having it out with Tony. You were right, of course. Better leave it alone, at any rate for today. They’re all on edge. Not responsible for what they’re saying. I told you that Tony was a damned liar to say such an infamous thing, but I realise now I was wrong. Exaggerating, just as Tony himself had been exaggerating. It’s possible my wife did say something to him about being worried over Madge. The girl works too hard, I know that, and Tony got it all out of focus and made up this story about the notebook. Natural enough. I dare say, considering the state he’s in. One thing’s a great comfort to me. Chief Inspector, and that’s Madge herself. Perfectly calm, perfectly sensible. She’s a tower of strength to us. When everybody else loses their heads, she keeps hers.”

“Yes,” agreed Macdonald, “that’s perfectly true. I think her behaviour today has been admirable.”

“She’s a fine girl. I’ve always had a particular affection for Madge. It’s hard for a girl to lose her own mother as Madge did, and though Muriel was devoted to her, it’s not quite the same thing. Her own children were bound to come first.” He sighed heavily, the sigh of a tired old man, and then

added: “I don’t know' if I ought to ask. Chief Inspector, but can you see any daylight at all in this problem?”

“It’s too early to formulate any opinion, sir. Some of the evidence is still confused, and it’s far from complete. We like to get corroborative evidence of every statement. For instance, it’s desirable to get independent testimony, wherever possible, of everybody’s movements, and that takes time. May I give you some instances?”

“By all means do.”

“Take the hour between nine-fifteen and ten-fifteen on Monday evening,” said Macdonald. “You were out. Miss Farrington was out. Mrs. Strange was alone in the drawing room. Mr. Strange was alone upstairs. The twins were entertaining their friends. All those statements need to be corroborated where corroboration is possible.”

“Well, you can start with me,” said the Colonel. “I went out of this house, turned left, took the first on the left and the second on the right into St. John’s Wood, High Street, and went into the Red Lion. I dare say the barmaid would remember me. I asked for some sandwiches, told her my wife was ill and I’d had no supper, and she was very good about it and gave me a very decent meal. There’s a lot of kindness in the world if you go halfway to meet it. I stayed there until nearly ten o’clock, talking politics to the chaps there in the way we all do these days, and then I walked straight back here and joined Anne in the drawing room.”

“Thank you very much, sir,” rejoined Macdonald.

“I’ve no doubt that Madge will be able to give you all the details you want,” went on the Colonel. “She's like me—plain and decided. About the young people upstairs. Paula told me they were all dancers in her own show. They’ve been doing a turn at the Black Domino Club on three evenings a week. I can give you the name of their manager, I’ve got it written down here; outlandish sort of name. One of the boys calls himself Boris, and they’ve been doing a quintet dance with Paula as solo dancer. So if you want to find them, you shouldn’t have any difficulty. As for Tony, I’ll lay any money he was doing *The Times* crossword. He always does. Hardly ever takes his wife out these days, lazy chap. And Joyce and Philip were together upstairs. So perhaps that sorts it out a bit.”

“You’ve been very helpful, sir,” said Macdonald.

“It’s my duty to be helpful, isn’t it?” replied the Colonel. “As I see it, it’s plain common sense to answer all your questions as plainly and fully as possible. I’m very much ashamed that the twins have behaved as they have. I feel it’s a reflection on their parents. Perhaps I deserved it, I don’t know . . . I haven’t kept an eye on them as I should—there’s nothing like fear to show up the weak points in young people’s characters.”

“Or anybody else’s character, for that matter,” agreed Macdonald.

TWELVE

DURING THE HOURS FOLLOWING MACDONALD'S first report to Scotland Yard (sent immediately after the discovery of Peter Farrington's drugged condition), the Criminal Investigation Department set its great machine :n motion. Neither the information broadcast about its encyclopaedic activities nor yet the memoirs of its ex-members have succeeded in giving the general public an adequate idea of the work that that department is capable of doing in a limited time. If the Chief Inspectors ask for information about certain aspects of the lives of those they interrogate, the facts are generally produced in a surprisingly short time, for there is no facet of human behaviour which has not its expert inquirers in the C.I.D. When Macdonald was told by Mrs. Pinks that Peter Farrington was in deep waters financially, Detective Inspector Jenkins got to work on the small data provided. By teatime the co-ordinated departments of the Yard had produced chapter and verse concerning a certain young man described as Ronnie Bellairs (among other names), whose bill for £500 had been optimistically backed by Peter Farrington. Ronnie was already under surveillance for suspected fraud, and Peter would have been interrogated that day about his guarantee even had Macdonald not started on the case. Philip Duncan's financial position and the possibilities of his play being produced were also elucidated, with small prospect of satisfaction to the many tradesmen who were his creditors. In addition to these routine inquiries, the C.I.D, sent out requests for information to all point-duty men in D Division who had been patrolling the area in which Windermere House was situated, with particular reference to Monday evening. A London police constable may look a solitary and self-contained unit as he patrols the respectable residential areas of the great city, but his contacts are many, and the keener his powers of observation, the greater the constable's hopes of promotion. He gets to know the postman, both collecting and delivering, and he knows the times they pass certain points, for the postmen, like the constables, are not casual in their timetables. The taximen on certain stands, the roadmen, the Borough employees, workmen whose jobs cause them to

journey at unusual hours, daily and evening domestic workers, all these may come under the notice of the observant constable. Thus, when the “information required'’ notice goes out from Scotland Yard, the potential suppliers of information are legion, for the Metropolitan Police can produce witnesses at every hour of the twenty-four.

Nobody was better aware of these facts than Macdonald, and nobody prouder of the promptness arid keenness with which the point-duty men respond to a request for information from “C.O.”

The Chief Inspector was not at all surprised to find a whole series of reports concerning movements and persons observed in the quiet and sedate thoroughfare which ran past Windermere House. It was an inhabitant of the nearby High Street, who always took his dog for a walk after the nine o’clock news, who had noticed Colonel Farrington leaving Windermere House on Monday evening. This same observer, returning a few minutes later, had seen a man dressed like an artisan who had been standing outside Windermere House at twenty minutes past nine. At half-past nine the artisan had been noticed by a postman returning from the sorting office. At nine thirty-five an empty taxicab had cruised past the house and the driver reported that nobody was standing outside, but at nine-fifty a “sitter-in” returning home from a neighbouring house had seen a man agreeing in description with the artisan just coming away from the Farringtons’ house.

The next item of evidence was obtained through the help of a small garage owner off the High Street. This man (Bert Thompson) ran a hired-car service, and his son had been out fetching a party from a dance in the West End. He had dropped his clients in the Avenue Road and returned home past Windermere House shortly after two o’clock on Tuesday morning. Young Thompson remembered clearly seeing a group of young people sitting on the steps putting their shoes on. The street lamp showed them up distinctly, and one of the girls had waved a hand at Thompson’s car, trying to hail him. He had slowed down, but feeling that it was too late to take another fare, he had not stopped. He was quite sure, however, that no one was standing on the steps beside the four who were employed with their shoes, and he said that the door was shut behind them.

It was after tea on Thursday that Macdonald ran to earth the first of the four young people who had been at the twins' party on Monday evening. This was Isabel Brown, professionally styled Belle Barrington, whom the manager had described as the most sensible and reliable of the four. She lived in a small house just off the main road where the self-conscious superiority of Maida Vale becomes the native pewter of the Kilburn High Road. It was a humble but respectable house, and Belle lived with her parents. The girl opened the front door herself: she was a pretty youngster, neat and dainty, and she looked at Macdonald with puzzled blue eves. He explained that he was making routine inquiries about a possible theft at Windermere House, and the usual shadow of apprehension clouded the bright young face.

' But how awful! Paula's mother only died a few days ago, didn't she? It was dreadful for her, and just after she'd given us that lovely party. You'd better come in, hadn't you? People do talk so."

She led Macdonald into the narrow passage and called out: "All right, Mums. Someone for me. Shan't be a tick," and opened a door on the right of the passage. Macdonald entered a small parlour which seemed to him the prototype of numberless other small parlours where duty had taken him. The girl was different from the majoritv whom he had interrogated: cleaner, fresher, more wholesome, as graceful as a wind-tossed spray, but the same fear was in her eyes.

"It's a very simple matter," said Macdonald. "I want to know the times you reached and left Windermere House, and what you did, more or less, at the party."

"We got there about eight," she replied. "Peter met us at the corner of the road and warned us to be quiet going upstairs because he didn't want his mother to catch us and ask to be introduced and .ail that. I'd seen Mrs. Farrington before and I didn't want to see her again—not all that—so we thought it was a good idea to be quiet on the stairs. Peter let us in with his latchkey and we crept up. Daphne tripped over her frock on the last flight and we got the giggles, and Peter's elder sister came out and ticked us off. But it was O.K. after that."

‘‘And then?" asked Macdonald.

"Oh, Daphne and I went and left fur coats in Paula's bedroom and then we went into Peter's studio. It's an attic, really, but he paints there. We had

some drinks and then we danced. That’s all there was to it, really. It was fun, and Paula had got some lovely eats—we just took sandwiches and things as we felt like it, and if we wanted a change we went and sat on Paula’s bed and talked. And then we danced again. There’s nothing much to tell.”

“Did any of you sit out on the landing or go downstairs?''

“We didn’t sit on the landing; it was cold, for one thing, and we didn’t want to make a noise on the stairs. We did go down to the bathroom, but we were awfully quiet. I know nobody went right downstairs.”

“How did you know that?”

“Well, the floor Mrs. Duncan’s flat is on used to be the nurseries and there’s still a gate across the stairs. It’s generally folded back, but Paula went and closed it after we got there, just to remind us not to go farther down if we forgot where the lav was. It’s got a sort of trick lock, and you can’t open it unless you know how. I know she said Peter was an awful gump because he doesn’t remember how the catch works, and certainly none of the rest of us did. So I’m quite sure none of us went right downstairs until we went home.”

“Can you remember what time that was?”

“It was about two. For the last hour we’d been sitting around telling stories—you know the game when somebody begins a story and breaks off at the most exciting part and somebody else has to go on. I was getting sleepy, and I persuaded the others we’d better go home. You see, Boris lives in Balham, and it’s an awful job getting back there at two in the morning. Daphne and Pat live at Willesden Green, but they generally manage to pick up a lorry.”

“You're all used to being out late?” put in Macdonald, and she smiled back at him quite naturally.

“Oh, yes. It’s usually about one or two if we’ve been doing a cabaret show.”

“Did the twins come downstairs with you to let you out?”

“Paula did. She‘d got a torch, because she didn’t want to put the lights on. She made us all take off our shoes, so we shouldn’t wake people up. I suppose her mother’s awfully strict. We’d never have done that here. Mum and Dad never mind if we make a noise.”

“Very sensible of them,” said Macdonald, smiling back at the blue-eyed youngster and thinking how pretty she was. “Didn’t Peter come downstairs, too?”

“I don’t think so. Paula told Boris to shut Peter in his room. He was a bit droopy—you know. Peter gets like that ever so easily. But I couldn’t be sure because it was so dark, and it’s an enormous house, isn’t it? Paula went first with the torch, holding it down so we could see the stairs. Daphne and I came next, and I was terrified one of us might slip or something. Anyway, I didn’t see anything but the stairs, and they seemed to go on forever. It really was a bit grim when you didn’t know the house. But we got down all right, and when Paula opened the front door it was much better, because there’s a street light outside. And we sat on the doorstep and put our shoes on, and tried not to giggle. It all seemed so batty.”

“Did Paula come outside with you?”

“Yes, just for a minute. She was still afraid we’d make a row and waken her mother up. Then she whispered ‘Good night,’ and we all whispered, ‘Thanks ever so,’ and she went in and shut the door so you couldn’t hear a sound.”

“While you were putting your shoes on did you notice anyone passing in the street?”

“Only a car. Daphne waved to the driver, and Pat said. ‘Don’t be such a flat, we haven’t got any money.’ Not that it’d’ve mattered; Daff always gets away with it. But he didn’t stop, and we all walked together to Maida Vale. Boris turned towards Marble Arch, and Daff and Pat got a lorry man to take them, and I walked home. Lucky it wasn’t raining. I’d got my best shoes on and a long frock. Oh, I met the bobby at our corner—he knows me quite well, so I expect he could tell you what time I got back. It must have been about a quarter to three.”

She looked at Macdonald with a question in her eyes. “Was that what you wanted to know?” she ended up.

“I wasn’t really asking what time you got home,” replied Macdonald, “though I’m glad to know you’re friends with the bobby on the beat; they’re useful chaps to know, and often very helpful if you forget the latchkey.”

She laughed outright at that. “Did he tell you? He gave me a leg up to the bathroom window one night, and a good lecture into the bargain.”

“No. He didn’t tell me, and I don’t even know him,” said Macdonald. “But to get back to the Monday night. Can’t you remember if Peter came downstairs with you when you all left? I do want to know that.”

She looked apprehensive again. “But can’t you ask him?”

“No. He’s ill at the moment.”

“Oh-’’ She broke off. “Paula didn’t tell me.”

“When did you see her?”

“On Wednesday—yesterday. She came and told me about her mother, but she didn’t say anything about Peter being ill.”

“He was taken to hospital this morning,” replied Macdonald, “and his twin is very unhappy and upset, so I can't really get much sense out of her. Have you known the twins for long?”

“I’ve known Paula about a year. I like her. We all do. She’s different from us, because her people are rich and good class and all that, but she never behaves different, if you know what I mean. She’s ever so kind, she’d help anybody, and she’s a lovely dancer. That means work, you know. Nobody can dance like that without working hard.”

“I know they can’t,” said Macdonald. “What you’re really saying is that you respect Paula, isn’t it? Not because her people live in a big house, but because she’s a good friend and a good dancer.”

“Yes. That’s right,” said Belle eagerly. “I *do* respect her, There’s a lot to her: she’s clever, and she’s lovely, too, isn’t she? But she never puts on side. If I was ever in trouble, I could go to Paula and ask her to help. She’s like that.”

“That’s almost the nicest thing you can say about anybody, isn’t it?” said Macdonald quietly. “And didn’t Paula come to you yesterday and ask you to help her?”

The girl was silent, but her startled eyes answered the question. Macdonald went on: “I’m a policeman, as you know, but I admire loyalty. I like people who want to help their friends. Please believe me when I tell you there’s only one way you can help Paula now, and that’s by telling the truth.”

“But I haven’t said anything that wasn’t true.”

“No. I don’t think you have. But you haven’t really answered my question. Did Peter come downstairs or not?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t know,” she cried. “You think for yourself. It was dark, and we wanted to get downstairs quietly. There was only the one torch, and Paula held that down, so we could see the stairs. If you’re coming downstairs like that in a strange house, trying to be quiet, you don’t look to see who’s behind you, do you? And I didn’t like it very much, it was all a bit queer. I just wanted to get outside and get home.”

“You say it was a bit queer,” said Macdonald; “but you’d had a good evening, hadn’t you? Didn’t you think it was *just part of the fun’ to creep out like that—or wasn’t it? Was there something else which made you feel it wasn’t so good?”

“Well . . . I don’t know what it was. Everything was all right at first, and we all enjoyed it, and later on Paula seemed to be all het up.”

“Why was that?” asked Macdonald. “Because of Peter?”

“It might’ve been. He gets . . . squiffy . . . you know. Not drunk. Just dopey . . . It would have been better if we’d gone when I said, after the Light Programme shut down. It was all right up till then. After that it was—well, rather a washout. And I don’t really like that story game. It’s silly or else it’s nasty. The twins tell horrible stories, all creepy.”

“Why didn’t you go home when you wanted to? Did the twins keep on asking you to stay?”

“Well, you don’t like to break up a party, do you?” she asked, and then burst out: “Is it something awful? I mean someone like you wouldn’t come asking questions about missin’ teaspoons, would you? You’re not like our Robert on the beat.”

“It’s some rings that are missing,” replied Macdonald.

“And you think Peter took them? Is he really in hospital—”

“Yes. He's in hospital,” replied Macdonald. “Do you know him well?”

“No. He’s a bit fancy, isn't he? And I don’t like those pictures he does—the ones in the attics, I mean. I'd never seen them before.”

“I don’t like them either,” said Macdonald. “Did Peter ever try to borrow money from you?”

“He tried to from everybody. But Paula was quite fair about that. She told us not to lend him any. I haven’t got any, anyway. Oh, I know he’s a mess, but Paula isn’t. She’s straight, I know she is, over boys and money and everything. I’m sure she hasn't done—anything.”

“Not even for Peter?”

“No. Not even—Oh. I don’t know.”

She was very near tears now, hut Macdonald went on: “Paula came and asked you to say that Peter didn’t come downstairs on Monday night, didn’t she?”

“Well, even if she did, I told her I didn’t know. It’s true I know Daphne was just behind me, but I don’t know about the others. I didn’t *see* Peter come downstairs.”

“All right,” said Macdonald. “You’ve done your best, and don’t worry about it at all. Good-bye, and thank you very much for being so sensible.”

3

About the same time that Macdonald was talking to Belle, Anne Strange went and knocked on Joyce Duncan’s door. Joyce called, “Come in,” and Anne opened the door, saying: “Would you like to come down for a drink, Joyce? Eddie’s gone out, and Tony’s gone back to the office to work off arrears, and I’m longing for a drink, only it’s rather poor drinking by oneself. Is Philip in?”

“No. God alone knows where he is, I don’t,” replied Joyce. “All right. I’ll come down for a quick one. We might as well talk about it as sit and think about it, but I warn you I’m not far off the stage when I shall start throwing things about.”

“I think we’re all the same, Joyce, but don’t say so on the stairs. I believe that C.I.D. woman’s still snooping around.” They went down to Anne’s flat, and Anne shut the door of the sitting room and locked it and drew the heavy portiere curtain carefully across the door.

“I do hate the feeling that somebody may be listening at the keyhole, like Paula did this morning,” she said. “If we sit by the fire, it ought to be all right; it’s a long way from the door. What'll you have, gin or whisky?”

“Whisky for me, and make it a good one,” said Joyce. “I’ve been feeling like death ever since that C.I.D. man sat looking at me this morning, but I haven’t dared go out because I was afraid they’d stop me or follow me or something. Anne, do you really think she was murdered?”

“I suppose so. There’s no other explanation.”

“Couldn’t it possibly have been Baring? He was an awful old muddler, and blind as a bat, and even Father said he wasn’t fit to be out. And he ran into a lamppost on the way home.”

“I know. But you see, he left Muriel at quarter past seven, and she was still chattering at a quarter past nine. If he gave her insulin by mistake, she’d have been in a coma long before that. I don’t know anything about insulin myself, but I did get Madge to tell me that before that awful scene we had when Paula started screaming.”

“And Madge knows all about it, doesn’t she? And she’s got a marvellous technique with a hypodermic. She injected me for my second go of anti-typhoid before Phil and I went abroad last year, and she was so slick I never even felt the needle go in. Quite different from that clumsy old fool, Baring. When he did it I nearly passed out.”

“I don’t believe Madge did it, Joyce.”

“Why not? She hated Mother. You couldn’t blame her, because Mother ruined her life for her, and she’d have gone on ruining it. I don’t pretend to like Madge. I think she’s a ghastly creature, always grousing and backbiting and looking down her nose, but I do admit that Mother exploited Madge for all she was worth. If someone put a dose of insulin into Mother, it seems obvious it was Madge.”

“That’s just it,” said Anne wearily. “That’s why Madge didn’t do it. Whatever else she is, she’s not a fool. She wouldn’t have used the one method which was bound to bring suspicion on her.”

“But she counted on Baring turning up to sign a death certificate for heart failure and hold everybody’s hands and tell us we must all be brave. She’d never have thought it would be Scott who’d come along at six o’clock in the morning.”

“She’d have thought of everything, Joyce. Madge has a terrific sense of detail, and she was a frightfully good nurse before she crocked up. Madge could have worked out a dozen ways of killing anybody which could never be proved. I remember once when I first came here and Madge was still by way of being matey, I sat on the kitchen table and she told me half a dozen ways of bumping people off which could . never be proved. We were talking about detective stories and she said the only ones that interested her were the ones written by doctors or scientists who knew their

stuff. If Madge had killed Muriel with insulin, she'd have remembered to bung in the equalising dose, or whatever you call it."

"The what?" demanded Joyce.

"Oh, you know all this diabetic coma's caused by the sugar content of the blood: you can still put in glucose or something after they're dead so that the blood content is right."

"Hell! You seem to know a lot about it," said Joyce.

"Well, I read a fair bit, and listen to the radio. Anyway, if I know that an injection of glucose could make the insulin impossible to detect, I'm certain Madge does."

"Well, I don't know the first thing about it, and I jolly well don't want to," said Joyce. "Look here, if Eddie hadn't said Mother was bright and chatty at nine o'clock, wouldn't everybody have assumed that it was Baring's fault?"

"Yes, I suppose they would, but it's not much help saying so."

"Couldn't we get Eddie to say he'd got in a muddle, or something, that the wireless was on and he supposed she was listening to it, or he thought she spoke to him but it might have been the wireless?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Joyce. The only thing we can be quite certain of in this hell of a business is that Eddie will speak the. truth and stick to it."

"Even if it means landing Madge in the dock?"

Anne shivered. "Don't say such horrible things, Joyce."

"Somebody's going to be landed there, my dear, so it's no use going goopy over it. If it wasn't Madge, who was it? The twins? I believe Peter's bats enough for anything, and now they've hauled him off they may plump for him, poor kid. I know he loathed Mother; she'd been trying to convert him or something. Cosy little prayer meetings and heart-to-hearts. She simply shattered him: that's why he's gone to the pack."

"Weren't you ever fond of her, Joyce? She was your mother."

"Oh, God, don't start on that tack. I adored her when I was a kid, and then I suddenly got nauseated, when I was about seventeen, and began to go boymongering. But never mind all that. About Peter. He couldn't have done it, you know. He hasn't the nerve. I suppose Paula could have. She's as hard as nails inside."

“You’re all as hard as nails inside. I think you’re frightful, every one of you.” burst out Anne.

“Yes, we’re a nice family. I suppose we take after Mother. And now we’re all busy putting up defence mechanisms and trying to be more hard-boiled than we actually are. D’you realise we shall be in all the papers, Anne? They’ll have an inquest next, and then there’ll be reporters and press photographers raging round. If only Eddie hadn’t said she was talking to him at nine o’clock it would have been so simple. Can’t you talk to him about it. Anne?”

“No. I can’t and I won’t. It’s no good anyway; he’s got to stick to what he’s said. Joyce, were you awake when the twins brought their party down to the door?”

“No. I wasn’t. I sleep-like a log. They stopped dancing at twelve, and Phil and I said ‘Thank God’ and went to sleep. So it’s no use asking me if I were on the stairs, too, because I wasn’t. It must have been Madge you heard. What did you call it? The equalising dose or neutralising dose or whatever it is.”

“But it wasn’t given.”

“Oh, lord, what a mess-up,” groaned Joyce. “Perhaps she tried, and Eddie was awake . . . Say if he knows it’s Madge. Anne. He’d never tell. He’d rather die himself than let them touch Madge.”

Anne suddenly sat up, taut. “Who’s that? Someone going upstairs.”

“It’ll be Phil. About time. Well, I’ve got to tell him the cheerful news sometime, so I’ll go and get it over.”

“I wish I’d never told Tony I heard Madge on the stairs; it only made things worse,” said Anne miserably.

“We shall learn by experience.” mocked Joyce. “Another time we won’t utter. Just say I don’t know, I can’t remember, I didn’t notice. They can’t make anything of that. Once you say, ‘I saw her,’ she can say, ‘I saw you,’ and who’s to sort that one out? Thanks for the drink. Now I’ll go and talk to Phil.”

THIRTEEN

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK THAT SAME EVENING Madge went up to Paula's room and tapped lightly on the door. The C.I.D. woman opened it and came onto the landing.

"She's just beginning to wake up, Miss Farrington. She's slept for six solid hours, and I think she needed it. I don't think there's anything the matter with her but want of sleep, and she'll probably wake up perfectly normal. It might be better if you were with her when she wakes. If she sees me she may imagine things."

"Are you allowed to leave her with me?"

"Why not? You managed her jolly well this morning. I've searched everything in her room: there isn't a thing that could do her any harm. So will you go in and stay with her for a bit?"

"All right. I'll leave the door open, and you can hear if she says anything. Then you won't have to ask me about it afterwards. I've brought you up a tray with coffee and some sandwiches: it's on that table there."

"Thank you very much. You've been jolly decent to think of me, and it's an awful long way to carry trays up."

"I'm used to it. I'll go in and ask Paula if she wants anything to eat."

Madge went into the bedroom and walked over to the window, drawing the curtains back quietly. Paula stirred and rubbed her eyes. Madge went to the bed and said: "You've had a good sleep, twin. How's the head—better?"

"Yes, thanks. What time is it?"

"Just gone seven. Do you mind if I put the light on? You look a lot better now. Would you like some tea or coffee, or just a cold drink?"

"How's Peter?"

"Oh, he's all right. He'll soon be about again. It may be a good thing this drug business was found out. He'll have a chance to pull himself together."

“Do they think he did it—killed Mother?”

“I shouldn’t think so. I don’t, if that’s any help to you. He’s much too clumsy. But there’s no earthly object in talking about it. If you get up and have a wash, I’ll make your bed. Come along, you’ll feel better after a wash.”

Paula sat up. “Is that Macdonald man still here?”

“No. He left hours ago.”

“Did he say anything?”

“No. Nothing. Come on, twin, get a move on. I haven’t got Father’s supper yet. It’s worse for him than for anybody else, you know, and he hasn’t fussed a bit.”

“Why are you so decent to me all of a sudden? I know you hate me.”

“I wish you’d leave off talking, twin. I don’t care a snap about you either way, but I’ve told Father I’d look after you, and I’m not going to leave you with the bed in that state. So get up and don’t go on bleating like a lost lamb.”

Madge’s cool, impersonal voice had its effect. Paula got up and went over to the washbasin, while Madge stripped the bed with the deft swiftness of the trained nurse, turned the mattress, and remade it, turning in her “hospital corners” automatically and folding back the sheet in the best professional manner.

“Now that’s all nice and fresh, so back you pop, and cream your face, or whatever it is you do. and brush your hair properly. I’ll bring you up a tray in a few minutes. Have you got a book to read? Or will you go to sleep again?”

Paula got back to bed and sat up, looking like a child, save for her shadowed eves. “Madge, can you ring up the Chief Inspector?”

“I’ve no idea, but I’m certainly not going to. I’ve had quite enough of Scotland Yard for one day.”

Paula rubbed her eves, and Madge thrust a hairbrush into her hand, saying: “For goodness’ sake brush your hair. You’re usually such a tidy kid, and you look frightful at the moment. Which of all these messes do you put on your face?”

“The big pot. Madge, wasn’t he rather decent, that Macdonald man?”

“If we had to have a detective in the house, I suppose we were lucky to have a man like that who listened quietly and didn’t bully anybody. Father liked him, which was all that mattered to me. I wish you’d leave off harping, twin. We’re all a bit tired of it.”

“I want to talk to Macdonald, and I’d sooner get it over.”

“Well, you’re not going to talk to him tonight,” replied Madge. “Whatever it is, it can wait. Sleep on it, as our elders and betters always say. You may think better of it in the morning.”

“I can’t sleep any more.”

“Very well,” said Madge. “In that case I shall ring up Dr. Scott and ask him to come and give you an injection. You’ve been quite bother enough. We’ve all had as much to put up with as we can stand, and nobody’s going to sit up with you and be patient with you while you do a private wail. If you’re feeling rotten, it serves you right. You’re quite as capable of controlling your own nerves as anybody else is, so don’t be so damn selfish.”

“Have you ever nursed in a mental home, Madge?”

Madge went suddenly white. “No. I haven’t, and I don’t want to start, so if you’re feeling mental, don’t expect me to look after you. Now do your face, and I’ll bring you up a tray later, and then you can settle down again quietly.”

She walked deliberately out of the room and closed the door. The C.I.D. woman was standing in the passage, drinking her coffee with every appearance of unconcern. Madge beckoned to her, and they went together into the attic studio.

“You heard all that?” asked Madge.

“Yes. What do you imagine she wants the Chief Inspector for?” queried the other.

Madge shrugged her shoulders irritably. “I suppose she’s taken it into her silly head to confess that she killed her mother.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I know Paula. You’ve got to remember that she’s abnormal in one way, and that’s about Peter. Twins are often queer, and this pair is very queer. Paula’s always fought Peter’s battles. Lied for him, cadged for him, stolen for him. She knows Peter’s got himself into every sort of mess

and she’s ready to do anything to get him out of it. It’s a sort of inverted selfishness. She’s as hard as nails and as selfish as hell, and Peter’s her other self.”

“You told her just now that you didn’t believe he'd done it.”

“Of course I don’t believe he did it. He’s much too big a fool. Now, are you going to leave her alone, or go in and bear .the confession?” ■

“I think I shall leave her alone. She can’t come to any harm. I’ve wedged the window, and there’s not so much as a manicure set for her to try tricks with.”

Madge laughed, a short dry laugh. “No poison, no razor blades, nothing to hang herself on, window wedged. There’s nothing in the bed: I stripped every sheet and blanket off and punched the pillow's. Poor silly kid. I could be sorry for her if- Never mind. Well, now I’ll go and get her some thing to eat. You’re not my business, so I’ll leave you to it.” “Thanks for the coffee. It was lovely.”

“Glad you enjoyed it. Weren’t you once in hospital, training?”

“Yes.”

“Dog recognises dog,” said Madge dryly.

2

It was shortly after ten o’clock that Macdonald let himself into Windermere House, using the latchkey to the front door which the astute Reeves had found in Mrs. Farrington’s bag. The Chief Inspector had a warrant which gave him the right of entry, but he was not intent on a further search that night. He was thinking of Mrs. Pinks’ warning: “There’s going to be more trouble in this house.” So far as was humanly possible, Macdonald intended to avoid more trouble.

The Farrington family had all gone to bed early, each of them tired out with the strains and stresses of a day which had had the qualities of an earthquake, inasmuch as it had rocked the secure basis of their orderly lives. From the street Macdonald had watched the downstairs lights switched off. He knew to what uses the rooms were put; he saw the light go on in the Stranges’ bedroom, the light switched off in their sitting room. He saw the

basement darkened soon after nine o’clock, and the light shine out from Madge’s bedroom, and he had waited until the whole house was in darkness, walking patiently round the block until the last light, Paula’s, flicked off.

Then he let himself into the silent house, closing behind him the front door which nobody had bothered to bolt. He stood perfectly still in the hall, until his eyes grew accustomed to the faint light which entered through the fanlight above the hall door. There wasn’t a sound to be heard. Nobody knew better than Macdonald that somebody in that house was aware of the inexorable process of the law, closing in slowly like a giant trawl net. but that person had not found it necessary to keep the light on or to keep the wireless on in the effort to defeat thought or to keep fear at bay. The whole house was dark and silent and secret.

The Chief Inspector stood in the hall for quite a while. He was inured by training and practise to waiting, and his muscles accepted the strain of keeping perfectly still as readily as his eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light. He heard the grandfather clock strike eleven and wheeze itself back into the tick-tock which sounded so uncannily loud in the silent house. Then he opened the front door and Reeves slipped in beside him, another noiseless shadow among the shadows of the hall. Reeves also stood still for a while, and then he slipped away soundlessly, to stand just within the drawingroom door. Macdonald began to mount the stairs, and took up the position he had chosen on the first floor, in the angle of a tall cupboard which the Stranges used for their coats and macs.

As he stood there in the darkness his mind played with the oft-debated question—did the minds of those who lived there affect the houses in which they lived? Was there such a thing as “a happy house” or “a haunted house” apart from its inmates? Could anybody, unaware of the events which had happened in this house, sense the disease which Macdonald was aware of even in the silence which enwrapped it? Descendant of Highlanders who had believed in second sight, in ghoulies and ghoosties, in signs and portents, Macdonald was not superstitious himself, but there was some quality in the dark house where he stood which made his nerve ends prickle, as though he sensed the sum total of disturbance in those who presumably slept in the rooms around him.

3

It was after midnight when Macdonald heard the faintest of faint sounds on the floor above. Indeed it was hardly a sound at all, more a tiny vibration which told of movement, as though all the resting floor boards communicated a change in stress. As always, after a period of silent waiting, Macdonald felt that faint stirring reflected in his own bloodbeat, as though the communication of inanimate things was* passed on to flesh and blood. He was quite sure what that faint sound had meant—somebody had got out of bed, transferring their weight very cautiously to a different section of the floor. A second or so later he became aware that he himself was not the only person in the house who had noticed a movement on the floor above him. From a room across the landing on which he stood came a corresponding tremor and then a door must have been opened. It was opened silently, but the window in the room beyond it was open and the night breeze moved the air across the still house. Then followed exactly the sound which Anne Strange had described to Macdonald: the softest of footfalls on the stairs, where bedroom slippers padded faintly on thick stair carpet and a little dragging sound told of a dressing gown sometimes catching the carpet. Macdonald moved a step forward from his corner and counted the descending footsteps—there were eighteen stairs in that flight. When the person from above reached the landing and turned towards the flight leading into the hall, Macdonald bent low, so that he could catch a faint silhouette of the walker against the light which filtered in from the fanlight. So far as he could tell, it was Madge Farrington clad in a long, dark dressing gown. As soon as she started descending the next flight, Macdonald moved to the stairhead and followed, timing his own footsteps to hers. He knew that there was somebody on the landing behind him; whether it was Anne or Tony, he had no means of telling, but he in tended to keep between them and Madge—if Madge it were.

When she reached the hall the shadowy figure turned towards the door of Mrs. Farrington’s room and tried the door handle. The room was locked, but the dark figure stood there with fingers moving uneasily over the door panels in a senseless wandering gesture which was pathetic in its futility. At last the figure turned away. It was only the faint dragging sound of the slippered feet which told Macdonald the direction she had taken, for the back of the hall was quite dark. She was moving towards the basement

stairs, and Macdonald followed her. He remembered the direction and the furniture in the hall, but he had to put out his hand and find his way by touch when he was on the basement stairs. As Macdonald had already noticed for himself, the stairs were an atrocious example of bad planning—steep, awkward, with a nasty turn at the bottom. In addition to all this, the cord carpet on them was worn out and offered further perils to the unwary. Yet in spite of these difficulties the woman ahead of him went swiftly downstairs, still incredibly quiet. "‘It must be Madge,” thought Macdonald to himself. ‘‘She knows the steps so well she goes down them subconsciously. Her very feet know the way.”

Somehow he contrived to get down the steps in the black darkness, if not as silently as the woman ahead, yet making hardly any sound, and conscious that there was a movement in the hall above. That wouldn’t be Reeves, he thought. Reeves was the world’s best cat. There was somebody else in the hall, and Reeves would be behind that somebody. Macdonald heard a door open, and saw a faint oblong of light. The kitchen window was uncurtained and the street lamp outside shone glancing rays down into the basement. In the half-light Macdonald saw Madge cross the kitchen towards the dresser. It was when he reached the kitchen door himself he realised that there was a third person in the room. It wasn’t sight which told him so; it was partly hearing, partly smell, the smell of carbolic soap and the sound of quick breathing. He was just sorting out these impressions when a crash and a yell behind him came with the overpowering surprise of the totally unexpected. Crashing through the preceding silence, the uproar seemed as overwhelming as if the whole house had come hurtling down. Somewhere from the direction of the dresser came a gasping cry: “Oh, God. what’s that? What's happened?” and a gruff voice replied: “It’s all right, dearie. I’m here. Don’t you worry. You’re in your own kitchen. It’s all right.”

Whereupon Macdonald said: “Well, we might as well have the light on now, Mrs. Pinks.” He put the switch down and the charwoman blinked at him in the hard glare.

“It’s you, is it?” she asked. “Thank Gawd for small mercies.”

Leaving Reeves to cope with the earthquake outside, Macdonald stood and looked steadily at Madge Farrington. Her face was bloodless, her lips a hard pale line, her eyes black and staring, utter bewilderment in them. Mrs. Pinks turned her back firmly on Macdonald and put an arm round Madge.

“Don’t you worry about ’im, dearie, ’e’s not a bad chap. You’ve been walkin’ in your sleep, see? I guessed that’s what it was, wiv you so worried and that, so I just comes back and sits ’ere in case I’m wanted. Now you sit down and we’ll ’ave a nice cuppa before you goes back to bed again.”

“But what was the noise outside—or did I dream that, too?” asked Madge. “It was like a bomb-”

“Now, don’t you get worrying your pore ’ead about bombs, Miss Madge. That there row was somebody a-falling downstairs—most likely that other chap, the chatty one. Calls ’im-self a detective, making an un’oly row like that.” She turned to Macdonald. “And if you takes my advice, you’ll go and pick im up and tell ’im orf proper, frightening decent people out of their skins like that.”

“All right. I’ll go and see about him,” said Macdonald cheerfully. He saw Madge’s black eyes fixed on him in sheer horror, and he spoke to her very gently: “Don’t worry, Miss Farrington. You *were* walking in your sleep. You passed me on the landing without even seeing me, You sit there and have a cup of tea. The noise which woke you up gave you a shock.”

He turned away and went out into the passage, shutting the kitchen door behind him. The light was on in the passage, and Reeves was bending over a man’s body. He glanced up at Macdonald.

“It’s Strange. The silly chump tripped over that torn carpet and took a header. He’s not dead, only knocked out. I’m just checking up on his legs and arms.” He was straightening Tony Strange’s limbs, running a practised hand over him, and he added: “I’ve bolted that door at the top of the stairs. Didn’t want the whole boiling of ’em down here. That Madge was sleepwalking. I saw her face when she crossed the hall. What’s the other old girl doing here?”

“I don’t know. I thought I’d better leave them alone a bit. Madge Farrington’s nearly over the edge, and the old lady can do more for her at the moment than anybody else, I’ll go up and see the others,” replied Macdonald.

He went up the evil stairs, noting the rent where the stair carpet had been torn away when Tony Strange caught his foot in it and went headlong. Unbolting the door into the hall, Macdonald found Colonel Farrington, Anne Strange, and Joyce Duncan standing in a huddle, consternation on all their faces.

“I’m sorry you’ve been disturbed,” said Macdonald, “Mr. Strange went downstairs in the dark and tripped over the carpet. We don’t think he’s badly hurt, and Reeves and I will look after him. Will you all please go back to bed. or at any rate go to your rooms.”

“Has anybody been killed?” asked Joyce Duncan. She was shivering and her voice quavered. With her face devoid of make-up and her hair in a net she looked completely unlike the woman Macdonald had talked to the previous morning. Macdonald had seen old Mrs. Farrington’s body, and he realised that Joyce now looked exactly like her mother. All the youthful curves had gone out of her face and it looked old and rigid.

“Nobody has been killed, and there's nothing for you to worry about,” said Macdonald.

Colonel Farrington put a shaking hand on the Chief Inspector’s arm and uttered one word: “Madge?”

“Madge is in the kitchen. She’s not hurt, only upset by the unexpected noise,” replied Macdonald. “Now, once again, will you all please go back to your rooms.”

Anne Strange spoke suddenly. “Did Tony try to kill her? I’ve got to know. I’ve *got* to know.” Then, without waiting for an answer, she turned and fled upstairs, and Joyce followed her, saying: “Don’t be such a fool. Anne. You must be mad. . . .”

The old man looked at Macdonald despairingly and then threw up his hands. “My little Madge,” he groaned, “my little Madge. . . .” And then he, too, went back to the little dressing room where he had been sleeping since Mrs. Farrington’s death.

Macdonald went back to Reeves. “What d’you make of him?” he inquired, looking down at Tony Strange, who was now lying quite straight on the floor, with Reeves’ coat rolled into a pillow beneath his head and a baize tablecloth doing duty as a blanket, tucked neatly round him.

“He’ll do. Concussed a bit,” said Reeves. “I’m surprised he didn't break his neck. These stairs are hell’s own outfit. What about getting him up and putting him on the drawing-room sofa? It might save trouble if we remove him before he begins creating. I’ll keep him quiet while you have a word with Mrs. Thing.”

“That’s about it,” said Macdonald. “Let’s heave him up.”

Between them, both well accustomed to moving casualties and corpses, they got Tony Strange up the stairs which Reeves had called “hell’s own,” and laid him on the sofa in the drawing room, adding a chair for an extension and covering him with some additional coats borrowed from the hall. "

“He won’t come to for a bit,” said Macdonald, feeling the contused head with experienced fingers. “Go along upstairs and tell Maddox to be ready to come down if we want her. She’s been spending the night in Peter’s room.”

“I bet she’s not in Peter’s room now,” said Reeves, “or we should have had that other twin down here adding to the picnic. O.K. I’ll go and tell her. She’s a competent female, Maddox is.”

Macdonald stood in the hall until Reeves came down again, and then the Chief Inspector returned to the basement and opened the kitchen door.

Mrs. Pinks, closely buttoned in a large and shapeless coat, was sitting in the Windsor chair finishing a cup of tea. Madge was sitting in a chair by the table. Her head was sunk forward on her chest and her eyes were shut. Mrs. Pinks raised an admonitory finger. “Don't you wake her,” she .whispered. “She's fust gone off again. Me second was like that. Walked in ’er sleep reg’lar.”

Macdonald stood and looked at Madge. Her face was still pallid, but not with the shocking greenish pallor it had shown when she had stared at him a short while ago. Her breathing was quiet and regular. Standing there, watching her closely. Macdonald thought Mrs. Pinks was probably right. Madge was simply fast asleep.

He turned to the charwoman again and she whispered: “She’ll just put her head down on the table in two-twos and go on sleeping like that. Don't you wake her. She’s had about enough.”

Macdonald nodded. “I don’t want to wake her,” he murmured; “but I’ve got to talk to you.”

“O.K. Come in the scullery. I can ’ear if she moves then; an’ you might as well bolt that kitchen door while you’re about it.”

“No need. Reeves won’t let anyone come down here,” said Macdonald.

“Reeves? Oh—’im. I like ’im. Then you just come in ’ere and we can talk quiet, see?”

FOURTEEN

IN THE SCULLERY MACDONALD SAID: “You’d better tell me just why you’re here, Mrs. Pinks. Sit down. You’re tired, aren’t you?”

She nodded, her lined face more seamed than ever with weariness and distress, and sat down on a backless chair which she pulled from under the sink.

‘‘Reckon we’ve all ’ad about enough,” she said; “but grumbling don’t ’elp. I came back because of Miss Madge. I guessed what it was. It was yesterday I noticed it. Them drawers in the dresser, very neat she keeps ’em. One of ’em ’as ’er papers and tradesmen’s books and money in. She keeps the key inside the big tureen; nobody knows where it is but *er and me. She’s always trusted me, and not lost nothing by it neither, as she’d tell you ’erself. Well, yesterday she says to me, ‘Get the money for the baker out of my purse.’ ’Er purse is in that drawer, and I got the key out of the tureen. Well, ’er purse was there all right, and the money in it, so it wasn’t that Peter, but the drawer was all in a fair muddle as you never did see. and ’er cookery book she’s so careful of was all torn to ribbons.” Mrs. Pinks paused and then went on: “Well, it gave me a proper turn. I didn't say nothing, not wanting to upset ’er. I just got the money out and locked up the drawer and put the key aside till I ’ad a chance to tidy it up. When she went upstairs for a jiff I started putting the drawer straight. An’ in the middle of the muddle there was her passport she got when she thought of going away. She’d shown it to me, see. because ’er photo was such an ’oot. Always kept that locked away upstairs in ’er room, I know that. And there it was, all among the torn bits and that, proper crazy. What would you’ve made of it yourself?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Macdonald. “You see, I don’t know her as well as you do.”

“Well, I *do* know er. She’s the tidiest creature going, and the most sensible. And look at it. all in a blooming fiddle-faddle. She must ’a done it ’erself. see. because of that there passport. An’ then I remember ’ow she

told me as a kid she used to walk in ’er sleep, and my Liza does ditto. No end to the rum things that kid’ll do in ’er sleep if I don’t catch ’er at it. That’s it, I sez. She’s been walkin’ in ’er sleep, 'er being worried about the old lady’s death and that, so I’ll just slip back tonight and watch out. And ’ere I am, an’ a good thing too. if you asks me.”

“How did you get in?” asked Macdonald, and she looked him straight in the face.

“Latchkey. I got one for the back door. She cave it me herself.”

“Don’t they ever put the bolts on in this house?” asked Macdonald.

“Can't answer for upstairs, because I don’t know, but Miss Madge don’t shoot the bolts down here till she goes to bed. And I was here before then. Sat in the cupboard under the stairs so’s she shouldn’t see me. So now you know.”

“How long have you had the key to this house, Mrs. Pinks?”

“Nearly a year, now. And I knows all about what you’re thinking, so you needn’t bother to tell me.” She looked round quickly at the kitchen. “She’s moving. Goin’ upstairs agin. Let me go after 'er, just in case.”

“All right.”

She went into the kitchen, and over her shoulder Macdonald saw Madge walk to the kitchen door like an automaton. He suddenly remembered that the door at the top of the basement stairs was locked, and slipped out into the passage and blew cautiously into the speaking tube of the service lift.

“Reeves? Unbolt that door, quickly. Let her go up.”

He heard the bolt slip back a second later, and Madge went on slowly up the basement stairs with Mrs. Pinks behind her. Macdonald knew that Reeves would be on the alert, and the reliable Maddox was upstairs, so the Chief Inspector went back into the kitchen, found the key of the dresser drawer in the big tureen, and opened the drawer. It was as tidy as a drawer could be, with account books, ration books, bill file, purse, notecase, all arranged neatly on the smooth lining paper of the drawer. He was still thus employed when Mrs. Pinks reappeared and sat down heavily at the kitchen table.

“She went straight back to bed agin,” she said. “If this sort of thing goes on, she’s for it. No woman can stand too much. The time comes you

just crack up. Don’t feel far orf it meself when all’s said and done.”

“Look here, Mrs. Pinks,” said Macdonald, “I wish you’d take your courage in both hands and give me a few straight answers, even though it does seem to go against the grain. What was the real situation between Mrs. Farrington and her stepdaughter? Was Mrs. Farrington fond of her at all?”

Mrs. Pinks sat and thought for a while. “All right,” she said.

“I’ll trust you. I may be doin’ the wrong thing, I don't know, but I’ll trust you. I reckon you’ve got more sense than most, and you been pretty decent so far. The old lady hated Madge. Hated her, see? And for why? Because she was jealous. The Colonel’s always been special fond of Madge and she of ’im, and it just made the old lady so mad there wasn’t nothing she wouldn’t’ve done to make trouble between ’em. As the Colonel got older ’e sorter turned to Madge, more an’ more. She understood ’im, and that’s more’n ’is wife ever done. Not that Mrs. F. wanted to get rid o’ Madge. Not much. Lazy as sin, Mrs. F. was, and smart with it. She knew she’d never get no one to run this ruddy ’ouse like Madge runs it. Cook and clean and everything smooth as clockwork. But Mrs. F. was always trying to show the Colonel what a mean, spiteful daughter ’e’d got. It’s got so’s Madge wouldn't never ’ardly put ’er nose abovestairs, there was always something if she did.’’

Macdonald nodded. “Yes. I understand all that. The stepdaughter-stepmother relationship has always been difficult. But you say that Mrs. Farrington tried to show that Madge was mean and spiteful. Wasn’t there more to it than that?’’

The old woman sighed. “All right, ’ave it your own way. Been talking to Tony, ’aven’t you? Mrs. F. wanted to make out Madge was crackers. To keep ’er under ’er thumb, see? She must never go away. Always got to be watched.”

“Yes. I see.” said Macdonald. “And now about Madge herself. You told me just now I’d got some common sense. So have you, so you might as well go on.”

“Suppose I might.” she said wearily. “Madge hated her back. Who wouldn’t? And she was afraid of ’er in a way. knowing what she was at. But Mrs. F. was much more afraid of Madge in some ways. Madge mustn’t never go into ’er bedroom. Never pass ’er on the stairs. Never be alone with ’er. I seen it. I know. You see, Mrs. F. knew Madge wasn’t crackers, knew it

quite well. And she knew as ‘ow Madge saw through ’er, wiv ’er darling Madgie one minute and I’ll just ring up Dr. Baring about ’er the next. There it was, something shocking, and the pore old Colonel always pretending everything was O.K.”

There was silence for a moment, broken only by Mrs. Pinks’ slow, heavy breathing. At last she spoke again. “If Madge ’ad been queer in the ’ead, no matter ’ow little, I should ’a known it. I worked with ’er every day for three years. She talked to me. I am the only person in this ’ouse, bar the Colonel, she ever talks to. Eve never ’card ’er say or do one thing that wasn't sensible, never. She’s got a tongue, I’ll not deny it, and she’s ticked off them lot upstairs time and again, but she’s never said an ’ard word to me. If she’s crackers, so’s you, and me, and everyone else. The only thing I ever known ’er do that was queer was muckin’ up that drawer. An’ she did that in ’er sleep. You saw ’er tonight.”

“Yes. I saw her. Did she ever come to see you at home, Mrs. Pinks?”

She stared at him. “I thought that was coming,” she replied. “Yes. She used to come and see my old man. Cooked ’im things ’e could eat. Spent ’er own money on birthday presents for the kids, and she’s not got much.” She broke off and gave another great sigh. “You might as well know. ’E died. My old man. This morning it was, while I was ’ere. Just went off in ’is sleep, same’s the old lady.”

“I’m sorry,” said Macdonald, and she sniffed back her tears.

“Oh, ’e ’adn’t ’ad much to live for, not this last year or two. Something else wrong besides that there. They took ’im to the mortuary. We’ve only got the two rooms. Gave the other to a young married couple. So ’e ’ad to go. That’s why I managed to pop along ’ere tonight. Nothing I ’ad to do at ‘ome.” She wiped her eyes and sniffed again.

“Now let’s get this straight,” she said. “Maybe you’re goin’ to say as ’ow Madge pinched that stuff from the lot I got for me old man from the National ’Ealth. Maybe you’ll say, that’s why ’e died, ’im not ’aving the right doses, seeing some ’ad been pinched. I’m not such a fool as I look. I reckoned you’d work that one out, and I did, too, quite as quick as you did. And I tell you it ain’t true. I giv’im the stuff meself, an’ ’e ’ad it according. An’ if you’re thinking of pulling that one over Miss Madge, I tell you it won't work. I’ll say I giv’ it to the old lady meself, see? I could ’a, too; I was here that evening, wasn’t I? So that’s that. An’ if you want to run me

in, you get on wiv it. Me sister'll look after the kids. Down in the country, she is. But you leave Miss Madge alone. I reckon I've 'ad a better life than she 'as; 'ard though it's been some ways, I've 'ad me fun, and it's more'n you can say of her. So what abaht it?"

"I think you'd better go home and look after those kids," said Macdonald, "and leave me to sort things out here. So off you go."

"And 'ow d'you know I didn't do it?" she asked truculently.

"I don't know, Mrs. Pinks. But I'm not going to oblige by arresting you until I've got the evidence. Thanks very much all the same."

She stood, arms akimbo. "An* 'ow d'vou know I won't bolt?"

"Again. I don't know. But I shouldn't if I were you. You wouldn't get very far. so you'd only be wasting your money."

"Call yerself a cop," she said with withering scorn. "You're too much like an 'uman being. All right. I'll be going. But remember. I warned you."

"More than I did to you," replied Macdonald.

2

When Macdonald had seen Mrs. Pinks out of the house, he bolted the basement door and went up to Reeves, who was hovering by the drawing-room door, alternately keeping an eye on the hall and on Tony Strange, who was beginning to stir a little.

"Well, we seem to be getting quite a series of reactions," murmured Reeves. "I reckon Madge was sleepwalking all right. Mind diseased, what?''

"Not diseased in the accepted sense. Reeves. She's as sane as you or I. but her mind's in a turmoil of fear and distress, and the reason's not far to guess. I've been talking to Mrs. Pinks. Her husband died today—probably diabetic coma. She had argued out for herself the implications of that one."

"Had she. by heck," said Reeves. "I reckoned she could follow out what you would call a logical sequence of events. She's made like that, looks things straight in the face."

"She does that all right," said Macdonald, "to the very end. She told me that if I thought of arresting Madge, she—Mrs. Pinks—would say she'd

killed Mrs. Farrington herself, and reminded me that she was here on the Monday night."

"She's a game old scout," said Reeves; "but we can't have her doing that. She'll mack up the doings properly. Madge must have been damned good to the old soul to make her feel like that about it."

''I think she has been good to her," said Macdonald. "Hallo, your patient's showing signs of animation. You'd better go and keep him quiet and persuade him that he's better off on the sofa than anywhere else. I don't think things'll be improved by sending him up to his wife at the moment."

Reeves went back into the drawing room, and Macdonald sat down on one of the chairs in the hall. He did not in the least expect that this unquiet household had settled down for the remainder of the night, but he decided to wait on events and spend a few minutes thinking out the implications of what had occurred in the past hour.

It was about half an hour after he had left Reeves that Macdonald heard a door open on the first floor. The sound of voices from the drawing room had ceased. . . . Reeves had evidently persuaded Tony Strange to keep quiet and to make the best of the sofa. A light /was on in the hall and it shone on the wide dignified staircase, showing the good Turkey carpet and the well-polished handrail. A dignified, prosperous, middle-class interior, thought Macdonald, much too decorous to make a suitable setting for the seething hates and fears of those who dwelt in this mansion.

When the door opened there was silence for a few seconds, as though somebody stood listening, and then came the swish of a silk dressing gown: Joyce's taffeta dressing gown, observed Macdonald. Mrs. Duncan was presumably going back to her own flat after talking to Anne Strange. Joyce moved very carefully, with only an occasional click from her feather-trimmed mules. Then another door, on the second floor, was cautiously opened and closed. Another five minutes passed before Anne Strange came out of her room. She came deliberately downstairs, and Macdonald stood up when she reached the hall.

"Can I speak to you, please?" she asked.

"If you wish." rejoined Macdonald quietly. "Shall we go upstairs to your sitting room? Your husband is on the sofa in the drawing room. He may be awake, and if he hears you talking he may want to come and join in."

She nodded, a sort of surprised look in her eves—surprise that anybody could sound as tranquil and ordinary as this C.I.D. man did. She led the way upstairs and they went into the sitting room, where bowls of daffodils were in flower, each bowl standing on a cork mat which protected the rosewood tables.

Macdonald closed the door and stood just inside the room. “You’ll be worrying about your husband. Mrs. Strange. He’s all right. He knocked his head as he fell and he’s concussed a bit, but it’s nothing to worry about. Are you sure you want to talk now? Wouldn’t you be better advised to wait until morning? It’s easy to get things out of focus in the middle of the night.”

“Haven’t we all got things out of focus?” she asked. “That’s just the trouble. I can’t go to sleep, and I’d rather talk to you and get it over. I lost my head just now, when I asked you if Tony had killed Madge, but I was terrified when I heard that crash. I’d like to explain, if I may.”

“As you will,” said Macdonald; “but remember that we, as police, have had plenty of experience of what nervous tension can do, even to seemingly well-balanced, well-behaved people like yourselves. It’s very difficult to keep quite normal under circumstances like this.”

“That was very kindly said,” she replied. “I think you’d be quite justified in considering us all mentally unstable.”

“I don’t do that,” replied Macdonald. “Nerves affect different people in different ways. For instance, Miss Madge has kept her self-control completely when she was awake. When she went to sleep her subconscious took over and she walked in her sleep. Didn’t it occur to you when you heard her come downstairs on Monday night that that might be the explanation?”

“No. I just didn’t think of it. Do you mean that you did?”

“Yes. You could make two assumptions. First, the one your husband made, that she was responsible for killing Mrs. Farrington. If that were so, would she have been likely, when she was awake, to come downstairs at the very moment when the twins were taking their visitors down, with the possibility that the light in the hall would be switched on so that she was seen by them? Of course she wouldn’t. It was the very last moment she would have chosen. But if she were walking in her sleep, the whole thing was perfectly explicable. The slight sound overhead, when the party moved off, was enough to make her stir, and she went downstairs unconsciously. I

think she probably went right down to the kitchen, as she did tonight. She told me she had taken three aspirin tablets, so she was very sound asleep."

"Do you believe all that she says?" asked Anne incredulously.

"She has been much more accurate than most witnesses," replied Macdonald. "Some things she has omitted. 1 know that, but no witness can be expected to relate every detail which may go in the scale against them."

Anne shivered. "You said there were two assumptions," she said slowly; "one being Tony's."

"Yes. One that she was guilty, and if so, I argued she wasn't awake. But if she were innocent, and had still been awake, she would certainly have asked the twins what they were doing, and you would have heard her."

"But you didn't know if I were telling the truth." said Anne. "Of course I didn't—but I believed you had heard what you said you had heard when you described the dragging sound her dressing gown made and the faint thud of bedroom slippers. That was observation, not make-up. Now what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"What I said about Tony. It was crazy of me, but I was nearly frantic because I knew he had made up his mind that Madge killed his mother, and we've all been getting more and more on edge as the day went on. I heard him get up and I heard Madge when she got out of bed and I was stark terrified. Of course it was crazy, but things get like that at night. Then I heard that awful crash, and I went flying downstairs, absolutely convinced that something hideous had happened. And the door at the top of the stairs was locked and 1 heard your voices, and I think I just went mad with sheer nerves."

"That's the way things can happen," said Macdonald. "It didn't occur to you that the converse had happened and that Madge had attacked your husband?"

"No. She wouldn't I can't tell you why I'm so sure, but I don't believe Madge did it. That's why I got so unreasonable with Tony, even though, as he pointed out. Paula tried to make out *I* did it. But I wanted to explain to you why I said such a frightful thing about Tony. I just didn't know what I was saying."

'Let's try to get this straight," said Macdonald. ''What you're really thinking is that your husband believes that Madge killed his mother and he's determined that it shall be proved she killed her, willy-nilly?"

“I don’t know,” she said miserably. “I’ve got to the stage when I dare not look my own thoughts in the face. Of course I knew all about Tony and Madge. Mrs. Farrington brought them both up. She adored Tony and hated Madge. Tony was one of those successful children, bonny and clever and healthy, admired by everybody. Madge was plain and stupid and sullen. She must have had a miserable childhood, and of course she was always trying spiteful silly tricks on Tony— you can’t blame her. So whenever anything went wrong Madge was always blamed, and it’s the same now. Tony can’t be fair to her. I don’t like Madge, but I haven’t got a thing about her, like Tony has.”

“Did you realise that Mrs. Farrington insisted that Madge was of unsound mind?”

“I’ve heard her make horrible suggestions, but she never risked saying anything outright to me. I loathed Mrs. Farrington. We all did, except Tony and Eddie, and even Tony got mad sometimes, especially when Mrs. Farrington said things about me.”

She broke off abruptly and then went on hastily: “So you see. we weren't a very happy household. I suppose I could have got out of it if I hadn't been so lazy, but I’m a born procrastinator. Always hoping things will be better.”

Macdonald, listening to a great deal in Anne’s narrative that was already familiar to him, noted the one point which opened a new vista on this sorry story of family feuds. Anne went on: “When you first questioned me I tried to observe the decencies, to pretend that everything here was all right. It’s second nature to try to cover up family difficulties when you’re talking to a stranger. But now I know it’s no good. You’ve seen us all with the lid off. Do believe me when I tell you that even I didn't realise how bad things had got, with Madge and the twins being in such a state.”

“Did you know that Peter had backed a bill he couldn’t meet and that Paula was ready to do anything to get the money for him?”

“I knew he was in a mess and that she wanted money to get him out of it. I didn't realise he'd taken to drugs. None of us knew that, unless Paula did.” Her voice died away, a very weary voice, and then she made one more effort. "You do realise 1 didn’t mean what I said about Tony attacking Madge? I know he wouldn’t do anything violent, he's simply not made like that.”

“All right,” said Macdonald gently. “I won’t hold you accountable for what you said, and, in any case, no wife is asked to give evidence against her husband, you know, even when there’s quite a lot to give. So why not try to go to sleep and forget it all for now?”

“If I could only wake up and find it was all a nightmare,” she replied.

FIFTEEN

“ANNE, I’M SO SORRY. I didn’t know about Mrs. Farrington’s death. If I had I’d never have come worrying you now.”

Veronica Coniston stood on the hearthstoned doorstep of Windermere House and looked at Anne Strange in some embarrassment. “So I’ll just run away now and ring you up sometime later if I may,” concluded Ronnie.

“No, don’t do that,” said Anne. “Come upstairs and talk to me. I’m sorry if I stared at you as though you were a stranger, but life’s been a bit wearing. I’m terribly pleased to see you, so come along in. How’s the infant, and how’s Tom?”

“The infant’s bursting with health, and Tom’s trying to teach me to play chess,” said Veronica as they crossed the hall and went upstairs. The house was utterly quiet, and it felt cold, as though the central heating were off, but Veronica was mainly concerned about Anne. “She looks deadly,” thought Veronica. “What on earth can be the matter?”

“I’ve always wanted to play chess, but I can’t think several moves ahead,” said Anne, her voice elaborately casual. “Here we are, Ronnie. Don’t my daffs look lovely?”

It was nearly half an hour later that Veronica said: “I see,” as she had said once before. Anne, after avoiding the subject for some time, had at length told her friend about Mrs. Farrington’s sudden death and about the doctor’s refusal to sign a death certificate. Veronica, helplessly at sea, had murmured her meaningless little phrase because she didn’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry you’re so worried, Anne,” she went on, and then Anne had put her face in her hands and cried.

“Sorry, Ronnie, but I feel better for the weep all the same,” said Anne at last. “You might as well hear the rest. I don’t suppose I ought to have asked you to come in, but I didn’t think of that. We shall be in all the papers tomorrow, and the reporters may get on to you. She was murdered.”

Veronica became conscious of a mounting sense of horror as Anne, her voice no more than a murmur, told of the nightmare which held them all in its grip. “We’re all in it, Ronnie, every single one of us,” said Anne. “We’re suspects, we could, any of us, have done it, and I don’t see how they can ever prove who did. We all had something to gain by her death.” Veronica shivered; then she pulled herself together and summoned her courage and common sense to her aid.

“Listen to me, Anne. I can see that it’s horrible, and if I were living here I expect it would have got me down, as it’s get you, but remember I come in from outside. I’m not numbed by the horror of it all, and I can look at it squarely. No one is going to believe that a woman like you committed murder because your mother-in-law exasperated you. It’s silly. You’re not living in a vacuum. You’ve got a past, and a character which was known—and proved. I knew you, remember. So did your commanding officers in the W.R.A.F. No one’s going to believe a thing like that about you, or about Tony, either.”

“I don’t know. Ronnie,” replied Anne. “Are you sure you don’t mind me talking about it? Somebody may get on to you next and ask you questions about me.”

“Let ’em.” replied Veronica. “I’ll tell them what I know about you, and if they ask me what you said, they’ll be told to go straight to hell, the faster the better. So get on with it, and for heaven’s sake let’s look at it straight.”

Anne looked into the fire, her face set and weary. “Sometimes, when I've read detective novels, I’ve thought how idiotic it was to make sensible, well-balanced people tie themselves up into knots and say dotty things they didn’t mean.” she said. “I always imagined I could keep my head and answer with some semblance of dignity and self-control, only saying what I meant to say and avoiding throwing mean suspicions on other people. Well, I started off like that. Then things began to go haywire. The twins went off the deep end and lost their heads. Then I told Tony that I’d heard Madge come downstairs on the Monday night, and Tony went to the Chief Inspector and said Madge was mental and she had killed Mrs. Farrington. So the Chief Inspector came to me and told me to repeat what I'd told Tony about Madge. I said that I’d heard the twins come downstairs on Monday night and Madge went down too. Paula was listening at the door, and she went hysterical and burst in and raved at me because I said I’d seen Peter

come downstairs, ending up by saying she'd seen *me* go into Mrs. Farrington's room in the middle of the night."

"Well, no experienced police officer's going to take any notice of accusations from a hysterical girl," said Veronica stoutly.

"No. but it all adds up," said Anne helplessly. "Hasn't everybody got something in their lives they don't much want to talk about, Ronnie? It seems to me as though we're all being stripped naked. Everybody's private affairs have become the subject of police inquiry: Peter's idiotic backing of a bill he didn't even understand, Joyce and Philip's debts and private rows. Eddie's evenings at his club, poor old darling, and my picking up an old friendship with Nigel Fairboys."

"I thought you'd washed out Nigel ages ago, Anne."

*'l did, but when I got terse with Tony, when he wouldn't take any interest in getting a home of our own, I just happened across Nigel again, and I thought it might make Tony sit up and take notice, because he's always been hellishly jealous. What I didn't realise was that Mrs. Farrington had seen me and Nigel together and she had started a smear campaign about us with Tony. Instead of having it out with me, he just seethed inside. And now I suppose that Scotland Yard's looking into all that and working out that both Tony and I were—well, hating the old lady with a deadly hatred because she was trying to make our marriage come unstuck."

Veronica sat in silence, appalled at the implications of all that Anne had been saying. "Do they know about Niael—the C.I.D.?" she asked.

"I expect so," replied Anne drearily. "I made a bad break with the Chief Inspector last night. We'd had a frightful scene, with Madge walking in her sleep and Tony following her downstairs. Oh. it was hideous. Ronnie. The two C.I.D. men were both in the house and saw and heard everything with the lid off. I thought I could make things better by talking to the Chief Inspector afterwards."

"What's he like?" asked Veronica.

Anne hesitated. "If I weren't so frightened of him I should just say he's a terribly nice person. He's got a very quiet voice—an unusually pleasant voice, with the least bit of Scottish accent in it—and he listens to all you tell him, and is honestly very kind and sympathetic. He's been a dear to Eddie. But I'm frightened of him. He doesn't miss a thing, and he knows I wasn't really straight to start with. I tried to pretend everything was all right here."

“Well, anybody would have,” said Veronica comfortingly. “No one could be expected to say, ‘We all loathed one another and she was a horrible woman, anyway.’ ”

“Oh. I know. I think he sees all that, but when I tried to get things sorted out a bit last night, and told him a little about what Mrs. F. was like. I let out that she’d been saying things to Tony about me. He didn’t say anything or ask any questions, but I realised afterwards he’d spotted it at once. He’s like that. He just gets his evidence from the mistakes we make and adds it all up.”

“What’s his name, Anne?”

“Macdonald.”

“But he’s frightfully well known. isn’t he? I heard someone talking about him once when we were discussing police systems in different countries, and Macdonald was quoted as an example of scrupulous fairness and impartiality.”

“I dare say he is impartial, and fair, too, but there’s something relentless about his very impartiality. Anyway, Eve got to the point when I should be almost relieved if they arrested me, and I could just sit in a cell and go into a coma and not think any more about anything. I’m tired of it all. Ever since Tuesday morning, when the doctor came, I’ve just been feeling more and more frightful over the whole thing.”

“Oh, Anne, pull yourself together and show a little spunk,” cried Veronica indignantly. “You know you didn’t do it. I know you didn’t do it, without even asking you, so don’t talk nonsense.”

Anne heaved a very large sigh. “If you only knew what a comfort it is to hear your sensible ordinary voice, Ronnie. None of us in this house is capable of being our normal selves any longer. That damned old woman. It makes me so mad. She tried to spoil all our lives—she drove Madge to the border of insanity, she ruined the twins, she made Tony believe I was a dirty trollop, she drove Eddie to spending his time in a low-down pub, she made Joyce wish she were dead. While she was alive she was a hundred per cent curse and now she’s dead she’s added compound interest.”

“That’s better, Anne,” said Veronica. “Get mad over it. It’s much healthier to get in a tearing rage than to sit and gloom over cells and comas. And do remember, although it’s frightful now. there’s always tomorrow.”

“I do try to remember that. I’ll make Tony sell this bloody house. Ronnie, or else give it away. She’s left it to him. She would. Oh, lord, I’d gladly go and live in a hovel, anything, anywhere, away from all this. God, who’s that?”

2

It was Colonel Farrington who had knocked. He stood at the door with a little anxious, deprecating smile.

“Can I come in. my dear? Oh—I beg your pardon, I didn’t realise you weren’t alone.”

“Come in, Eddie. It's Ronnie. You met her before, didn’t you? Come along in and shut the door. I’ve been telling her all our woes, and she’s been such a dear and done me so much good.”

“Then I’m very grateful to her,’’ said Colonel Farrington, Having shut the door carefully and pulled the curtain across it. he came and shook hands with Veronica.

“The sight of you would do anyone good, my dear,” he said. “You look so wholesome and healthy and happy. I’m afraid we have got into a sadly morbid state here. It’s all been very wearing, and I’m afraid we haven’t shown up so well as we should in the face of tribulation, though Anne has been very good, very straight and sensible. I never realised before how important it was to be absolutely straight *in* an inquiry of this kind. Let thy Yea be yea, and thy Nay, nay.”

“You make me ashamed of myself, Eddie.” said Anne. “You’re the only one of us who has had the courage to live up to your own convictions.”

“Madge has come out of it best.” said the Colonel quietly. “She has just told the truth, and it was hardest for her. I’ve realised that all along.” He turned to Veronica. “You see, Madge, as a nurse, was bound to bear the brunt at first. It was so easy to say she could have done it. She had the requisite skill and knowledge. But I think the worst of it’s over.” He turned back to Anne. “I dare not say too much, my dear, but I think we can see daylight. I’ve had a long talk with the Chief Inspector. He’s a very fine man, and I respect him wholeheartedly. He hasn’t let a detail escape him. It

seems they have found some strange fingerprints in Muriel's room— prints which could not have been made by anybody in this house."

"You mean somebody from outside, not in this house at all?" burst out Anne.

""Yes. my dear." said Colonel Farrington. "They went into it in meticulous detail. You know that Muriel's room is always cleaned on Monday mornings. The younger detective. Reeves, noticed what a thorough cleaner Mrs. Pinks is. He was pretty sure that when she cleaned the room she wiped the window ledges and finger plates and mantelpiece, and so on. If this were the case, it means that those strange fingerprints must have been made on the Monday after Mrs. Pinks cleaned the room. Well, as Muriel went into the room immediately after Mrs. Pinks had finished cleaning, and either she or I were there for almost the rest of the day, it can only be assumed that someone got into the room in the evening probably when I went out for a bit of supper and Muriel was asleep."

"You mean someone Mrs. Farrington knew?" cried Ronnie.

"No, my dear. I mean a thief. You see, some of Muriel's most valuable diamonds are missing. This will show you how conscientious these C.I.D. men are. Reeves told Mrs. Pinks to clean Muriel's room exactly as she had cleaned it that Monday. He himself had already swept away the fingerprint powder and so on, so there was no particular indication of anything which needed cleaning. The good old soul did exactly as she was bid. When she came out she said to me: 'Well, I done it as I always done it, no more, no less. Mrs. Farrington was particular and she'd soon have noticed if I scamped it.' They found she had wiped all the paint, and polished it as well. So that's a clear pointer. Someone else had been in the room after Mrs. Pinks had cleaned it. In addition to this, a man was seen loitering, 'with intent,' as they call it, outside this house between nine and ten on Monday evening."

"When I was in the drawing room," said Anne; "but I swear I didn't hear anything. Eddie."

"I know you didn't, my dear," said the Colonel; "but you remember there was a telephone call which distracted your attention for some time. They can't find what number was connected with this one, because the automatic system does not record such details of local calls. They have tried all Muriel's friends—all the numbers that were in her book—and no Mrs.

Jones rang up on Monday evening, at least no Mrs. Jones known to us, neither was it anybody concerned with the Primrose League fete. I can't tell you the trouble those detectives have taken. No one can have any conception of the detailed work which goes into an inquiry like this one."

"And have they really told you they're satisfied it was someone from outside?" asked Anne, and Veronica's heart ached to hear the passionate desire for a positive reply that was in her voice.

"Of course not, my dear. It's not to be expected that they should, at this Stage. The Chief Inspector is the most punctilious of men," replied the Colonel, but his voice was quiet and comforting. "Macdonald has told me about the fingerprint evidence, and he has also said that the prints they found are unknown to the police—not in their 'Rogues Gallery' collection, as they call it. He told me further that poor Baring's medical case has been recovered from the Regent's Canal. It was obviously stolen when his car crashed. Unfortunately, most of its contents had either been removed or fallen out into the water, but it's just another instance of the thoroughness of the police. There was insulin in that case. I'm very glad of that, because of Mrs. Pinks. She's been such a loyal old soul, but because she was devoted to Madge and because her husband suffered from diabetes there was a real danger she would be involved. I realised that myself and I was deeply troubled over it. I couldn't have borne that any loyal servant of ours should come under suspicion because of her very loyalty to her mistress."

Veronica looked at him with puzzled eyes, and he replied to her unspoken question.

"In honesty, one is bound to admit that there have been difficulties and misunderstandings amongst us," he said sadly. "Madge and Muriel, in particular, had been at cross-purposes. Unfortunately, Tony added to this confusion—I know Anne will forgive me for saying so. In giving evidence it is of the first importance not to exaggerate. Anyway, a wretched misunderstanding was magnified into a motive for murder. Because Mrs. Pinks loves Madge, it could have been suggested that she—Mrs. Pinks—brooded over the matter and took steps to end it. All quite untrue, of course. Just one of those hideous imaginings which tend to obsess our minds when we are frightened." The old man sighed and then made an effort to smile at Veronica. "Grown-up people, even old chaps like me. become like children if we give way to fear. We conjure up bogies and frighten ourselves. If we

could only face plain facts simply we should save ourselves so much distress.”

“I’m not a courageous person. Eddie.” said Anne. “I’m a plain coward. All the time I’ve been hoping that it could be proved that someone else did it. Not me. Anybody but me.”

Veronica slid an arm round her. “You silly old ass, Anne, everybody is bound to feel like that. It’s only human nature.”

“Human nature is nobler than you admit, my dear.” said Colonel Farrington. “We recognised *that* during the war. Mrs. Pinks told Macdonald that she would confess to the crime herself rather than have Madge blamed for it. In other words, Mrs. Pinks was prepared to be hanged for a crime she did not commit to save Madge from suspicion. It makes one very humble.”

Arne flushed and then went very white. ‘ Did she really say that. Eddie?”

The Colonel nodded, his face keen and stern. “She did, all honour to her, and all honour to the Chief Inspector that he refused to accept her statement. The poor old soul has got trouble enough. Her husband died yesterday. Anne. After they had taken his body to the mortuary she came back here, because she had guessed that Madge walked in her sleep and thought she might be of service to her—as indeed she was.”

3

It was Colonel Farrington who changed the angle of the conversation a little. “There’s always a lot of business to be done over estates,” he said. "My wife—very wisely, I think —named her bankers as her executors, but there are certain fairly simple matters I have been able to arrange. I know Anne will be glad to know that Peter's financial muddles are to be tidied up. I’m sorry for the boy. He was foolish and culpable, of course, but this may be a lesson to him. He must learn that he cannot oblige bis friends in such a lighthearted and irresponsible way. The hospital reports that his condition is quite satisfactory, and he is going on later to a clinic, for a course of treatment, in part psychological.”

Anne put in: “Then it’s really plain sailing. Daddy? The police are satisfied that no one here was responsible?”

"I don't know about plain sailing, Anne, but I think quite a lot of confusion has been cleared away. I think I can say this. There is no need for you to be frightened any more. Now I must get busy writing some more letters. I have been trying to write to all Muriel's friends. I hate those printed notices people send. So I will say good-bye for now, my dear," he added to Ronnie. "I'm sorry you have found us in such an unhappy state, and thank you for your kindness to Anne. A friend in need is a friend indeed."

Veronica got up and shook hands with him. When he had closed the door behind him she turned back to Anne. Anne was still sitting in the corner of the chesterfield, but her head had slipped forward and her body was limp. Veronica Coniston had a few seconds of terror before she assured herself that Anne had only fainted. Opening the window, searching for brandy and smelling salts, Veronica tried to silence the questions which would come crowding into her mind. There was something very terrible, as well as very pitiable, about Anne Strange's waxen face and cold, limp hands.

SIXTEEN

IT WAS ON THE FRIDAY EVENING that Macdonald and Reeves visited The Cow with the Crumpled Horn, the pub where Colonel Farrington played darts and took pride in his status as a member of the Darts Club committee. It was the matter of the unidentified fingerprints in Mrs. Farrington's bedroom which took the C.I.D. men to the pub. To be faced with unknown fingerprints in a city like London does not look a very hopeful clue for the police, but Macdonald had found from long experience that many such clues could be elucidated by a consideration of probabilities. In the case of a very wealthy establishment, where jewels of great value were known to be housed, suspicion played over the known jewel thieves, the expert cracksman, whose methods were intensively studied by the Yard men, so that quite often the thief left some sign or indication in the course of the methods he used. A less wealthy establishment, of the type of Windermere House, was not likely to attract the star cracksman. If a thief had entered there, it was likely to be some smaller operator who worked on the “information received” basis and who watched the house for an opportunity to make an unseen entrance through an unfastened window or door. While Macdonald was far from convinced that a theft of this kind had occurred at Windermere House, he was faced with certain items of factual evidence which could not be disregarded: some jewellery was missing; unidentified fingerprints had been found; a man had been seen watching the house on the Monday evening. It was obvious that these facts had got to be accounted for before any further progress could be made.

The local Divisional Police had already reported to the C.I.D. that Colonel Farrington was a well-known character at The Cow with the Crumpled Horn and was not only respected but held in affection by the habitues there. His natural unaffected kindliness and generosity and his willingness to help those in trouble had endeared him to the working men he met there. In addition was his willingness to try to comprehend an outlook on life which had at one time been quite strange to him. “He’s as

simple as a child," had said one worthy bricklayer. "Born and bred a Tory. Never thought but what all Socialists was scoundrels and the Labour Party a set of paid agitators. 'Now you just listen to me.' I said, and told 'im a few things about what life had been like for my dad in them good old days 'e talked about. 'D'you know, I never thought o' that,' he kept on saying. Listened, 'e did. very careful like. 'E's no use for Communists, of course, still all King and Country and that, but 'e showed a very fair, open mind, and many's the talk we've 'ad, 'im telling me about 'is dad and me talkin' about mine."

"There's always the chance the Colonel talked a bit too freely without noticing who was listening," said the D. Division sergeant to Macdonald. "Spoke of his own home and his wife, mentioning they had no resident servants, maybe, and everything was very quiet of an evening. A lot of these casual burglaries follow if a dishonest chap gets an idea it's all going to be easy, and Bob's their uncle."

It was eight o'clock when Macdonald entered the pub, got a pint of beer at the bar, and settled down with a book in a quiet corner. Five minutes later Reeves came in. looking like a garage mechanic to the life, wearing a bulging waterproof well stained with oil and grease. Reeves stayed at the bar counter, joining in the conversation with a natural zest which made him immediately a unit in a crowd of working men It was some half hour later that he picked up a dart from the tray where they lay and threw it at the board with an easy practised skill whose accuracy caused heads to turn and a murmur of approbation to arise. Unconcernedly. Reeves began to throw the other darts to form a pattern round his original bull's-eye, and Macdonald watched with some amusement. It was beautiful dart throwing, easy and accurate, but Reeves fumbled his final throw and swore lustily. "I don't like 'em," he said disgustedly, looking with disapproval at the darts on the tray; "not balanced to my liking. Now, take these—had 'em for years. Lovely darts, these are."

Inevitably the darts experts gathered round him to examine the two darts Reeves had taken from his pocket, to weigh them and throw them. Some matches followed, and eventually the Darts Club team played an exhibition match, and Reeves admitted handsomely that he himself was no class in comparison with the experts. It was at this stage in the evening's proceedings that Colonel Farrington's name was mentioned. They all spoke of him with respect and sympathy, and the matter of subscribing for a

wreath for Mrs. Farrington's funeral was mooted. Macdonald listened with particular interest to this. He wanted to know how far and fast news had travelled.

"There's been a bit o' trouble, I hear," ventured one of the darts team. "The doctor who attended the old lady got killed in a motor smash, and the other doctor wouldn't sign the certificate."

"Silly lot o' fuss it seems to me, making trouble for folks when they got enough already," put in another. "She's been ailing for years, his good lady had. Heart. You never knows with heart cases."

"That's right. Just pops off when you're least expecting it," said another voice. "That was a shocking smash the doctor had in his car. Rammed the lamp standard when he was travelling at speed. I saw the car before they moved it. Can't think how he came to do it, and nobody seems to know, either."

"I reckon a pedestrian ran across the road the way some fools do and the old chap got in a flummox avoiding 'im," said the original speaker. "No one really saw what happened, and they said his car was looted before the police arrived. Beats me how any chap can thieve over a corpse, turns me sick to think of it."

"What about these blokes who go cracking old women over the head for the sake of a few quid?" asked another. "This 'ere robbery with violence is something shocking. I reckon it's these ere army deserters do a lot of it, and what's the answer to that one. Gawd alone knows."

"The police ought to do something." This inevitable comment came from an old man by the counter. "An' talkin' of police, somebody said the Colonel's house was burgled the same night Mrs. Farrington died. Anybody seen the Colonel since Monday?"

"Of course not. He's not been in, not likely," said the member of the darts team. "And that reminds me. About that debate we was a-goin' to have, I reckon we'd better wash that out. The Colonel won't want to be bothered with them sorts of things just now."

"Well, I don't know. Might take his mind orf it all," said another. "Very set on it, 'e was. 'E's no use for pacifism, no use at all, and I'm not saying he's not right."

"Oh, come orf it, Charlie, we don't want to start on that now," said the darts expert; "but I reckon we'd better let the Colonel know we're not

expecting ’im to attend. Where’s Bill? Wasn’t ’e fixing it up? They thought of ’aving it in the Working Men’s Club.”

“Bill ain’t been in tonight, but I saw ’im yesterday,” replied Charlie. “Bill ’adn’t seen the Colonel; that was along of Mrs. Farrington’s bein’ took bad, I reckon. And ’oo was it said there’d been a burglary there?”

“I did. The roadman saw some Yard men at the ’ouse, and they’d been an’ asking if anybody’d been seen ’angin’ around outside on the Monday evening. Must be something in it.”

“Blimy, I don’t like the sound of that.” rejoined the other. “Maybe it was the burglar frightened the old lady and she had a heart attack along of it. That’s a shocking thing, that is. Next door to murder. I reckon.”

“What time was it the C.I.D. blokes was askin’ about?” inquired Charlie.

“All through the evening and up to two o’clock, I was told,” was the reply. “Must be something fishy somewhere. They don’t turn the C.I.D. on to a job without good reason. Now I reckon someone ought to drop the Colonel a line with our respects and regrets. Mr. Laver ain’t in tonight. He’d be the one to do it; these lawyers write something beautiful when they want.”

“I reckon the Colonel would as soon have a line from one of us, writing or no writing,” suggested another. “Lawyers’ letters won’t he no treat to him. What about you doing it, Charlie? Just drop a line with our respects and sympathy for ’im in ’is trouble. Nothing flowery, mind, and we can all sign it tomorrow. ’Ow about it?”

There was a general murmur of agreement, and after a moment Macdonald got up, put his book in his pocket, and slipped out unnoticed. A few minutes later he was joined by Reeves.

“That’s what I call a very useful evening.” said Reeves, and Macdonald said:

“What about those darts you’ve got in your pocket? About one to each pocket, I made it.”

“More or less,” said Reeves cheerfully. “I reckon I’ve got a print from all the darts players present, and if they’re not relevant they’ll all come out in the wash, as the saying is. I’ll leave Bill to you.”

“Yes,” agreed Macdonald. “I think I shall get Baines to knock up the landlord for me just after closing time. Baines makes his point here at ten o’clock.”

“D’you want me again?” .asked Reeves.

“No, you can go back and get your darts examined,” said Macdonald, “and if you take my advice, you'll leave that raincoat of yours at the Yard. Your wife won’t thank you for taking it home. It’s as high as Haman.”

“Think I’d take it home?” asked Reeves indignantly. “Not much. My Janc’d send it to the cleaners and a lot of good it’d be to me then. Honest dirt’s very confidence-making.”

2

It was shortly after closing time that Macdonald was admitted again to The Cow with the Crumpled Horn, after the patrolling constable had knocked up Mr. Waiting, the licensee.

“I’m sorry to bother you. landlord,” said Macdonald. “I expect you are quite ready for bed, but you may save us a lot of trouble—and other people, too, for that matter—if you’ll answer some questions now.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.” rejoined Mr. Waiting. “I’ve always been on good terms with the police and never had any trouble or complaints.”

“So I’ve heard,” rejoined Macdonald as they went into the landlord’s parlour and Mr. Waiting closed the door firmly.

“Well, you heard those chaps talking about the inquiries at Colonel Farrington’s house,” went on Macdonald. “I’ve come to you to ask a bit about the men’s characters, if you’re willing to give me a line on them. I mean the regular crowd—the darts players. They’ve formed a club, I gather.”

“That’s right, sir, and I’m willing to tell you all I know about them, and welcome. A very decent lot of men they are, and very particular about their club. Now, this evening there was the six of ’em—regular as clockwork they come in of a Friday. Charlie Evans, he’s a railway man, on the old L.M.S. at the Chalk Farm depot. Bob Higgins, he’s a lorry driver for Pattersons. Jack Harrison’s a bus driver. Will Robinson, he’s got a business

of his own, hardware and that. Fred Clark's a mechanic in the London Transport garage, and Dick Brown's a conductor on the Tube. All very decent chaps. Clark's a Communist, but not one of the agitators. You'll not find much wrong in that lot, sir."

"Right. Who's this chap Bill they were talking about?"

"Bill? Oh, that'd be Bill Preston. He's an old chap. He was a house painter, but he's not too good on ladders these days and he docs odd jobs on his own. Any bit of inside painting, or fixing a window sash or other small repairs. A very respectable kindly old chap. Lost his wife not so long ago, and the Colonel was uncommonly kind to him. I've seen them digging together on the Colonel's allotment. 'He misses his wife and a bit of company's good for him,' sez the Colonel to me."

"Have you any idea if any of these chaps has ever done any odd jobs at the Colonel's house?"

The landlord scratched his head, looking rather worried. "I won't pretend I don't see what you're getting at, sir, seeing what was said in the bar, but if Bill Preston did some inside jobs for the Colonel—and I'm not saying he did, mark you—he'd never have touched aught that didn't belong to him. I'll lay all I've got that Bill is honest. Never heard a word against him all the years I've known him."

"You're jumping to conclusions, landlord. I only asked if he'd ever done any inside job for the Colonel. Now, can you tell me this. Is he a talker? Would he have been likely to tell anybody else that Mrs. Farrington had some valuable jewellery, for instance?"

"I shouldn't have thought so. sir. Bill's a quiet old chap, and as for jewellery, I don't think he'd know diamonds from cut glass. Not in his line at all. Now, a good job of cabinetmaking would interest him. He knows that when he sees it—but he's no chatterbox."

The landlord scratched his grizzled head thoughtfully. "If you're agreeable, I could ask my missis to come in and tell you about Bill Preston, sir," he said. "She knows him better than I do, always has him in to do small repairs and odd painting jobs and suchlike."

"I should be very glad if you would," rejoined Macdonald. "She'll probably be able to tell me just what I want to know." A moment or so later Mrs. Waiting came into the parlour. She was a massive body, heavily corseted, and her black satin blouse with its lace collar and choker necklace

of large pearls were in the best tradition of the respectable publican's wife. Her husband explained what Macdonald wanted to know, and she replied without hesitation. "Old Preston's as trustworthy a fellow as I've ever met," she declared. "I always say he's useful to me because I *can* trust him. He knows this house, and I just tell him what I want done and let him get on with it without ever thinking of having to keep an eye on him. He's honest all right, you take it from me."

On the subject of Bill Preston's liability to gossip, she was equally emphatic. "Keeps himself to himself and never forgets himself, neither." she said. "In a licensed house you can't do with gossips. Not that we've anything to hide, but there's big takings some days and the locking up's important. We know there's plenty of these gangs about, ready to hold up anybody if they think they can get away with it, and I wouldn't have nobody doing odd jobs in this house if I couldn't trust their tongues as well as their fingers."

"Well, that's clear enough," said Macdonald. "I'll take your word for it about the man's character, because I don't think you're likely to be mistaken there. Now. bearing in mind that I *have* said I'll take your word for it, Mrs. Wailing, can you tell me this? Was Preston ever employed by Colonel Farrington to do any odd jobs?"

"Yes, he was," she replied without hesitation. "The shed on the Colonel's allotment started it. You've got to have somewhere to keep your gardening tools and that, and the Borough's particular about what's put up. Anyway, Preston put up the Colonel's shed, and just lately there was some question about him doing some work on the window catches at Windermere House. It was the Colonel himself who mentioned it to me. Said he wanted to have the new safety catches put on before he and Mrs. Farrington took their holidays. I believe Preston was going to the house to see about it someday quite soon, but I'm not sure if he'd started on the job or not."

"Thanks very much. That's just what I wanted to know/ replied Macdonald. "I shall have to see Preston sometime, so can you tell me where he lives?"

"He lives just over in Camden Town somewhere, but I can't tell you his address," replied Mrs. Waiting. "It seems funny, maybe, having known him for years, but I know he's sure to come in sometime during the week, and if I want him I just wait until I see him."

“Has he been here this week?” asked Macdonald, and the landlord put in:

“Yes. He was in one evening. Tuesday or Wednesday, it was. I know we’d just heard of Mrs. Farrington’s death, and Preston was quite upset. Now I come to think of it, I believe he was talking about going up to see his brother. He was Lancanshire born, and his folks live up north.”

“He’s been talking about going to see his brother for months,” said Mrs. Waiting. “I’ll believe he’s gone when I hear he's really been seen off on the train. Anyone might think it was like going to the North Pole, the fuss he makes about going a journey. But then he’s an old chap now’, and set in his ways. He’s lived in Camden Town for all of thirty years, and London’s home to him, same’s it is to us.”

The landlord spoke again, not sounding very happy: ‘‘Begging your pardon, sir. but can we get this clear? There’s been a theft of some valuables from the Colonel’s house. Is that right?”

Macdonald nodded. “Some valuables are missing.” he said, “and nobody in the house knows anything about them. We found some fingerprints in Mrs. Farrington’s bedroom that were not made by anybody in the house, and we want to trace them.”

“And if so be you find they’re Bill Preston’s, will you reckon he was the thief, sir?”

“Not unless we get further evidence. But if he was in the house recently, we want to know all about the time he was there and what he was doing. You have been straight with me. landlord, and told me all that you know about Preston, so I am being straight with you, but I advise you not to repeat anything I’ve been telling you. You have enough common sense to know that an innocent man’s got nothing to fear from the police.”

“I believe you there, sir. and I’m quite sure Bill Preston’s not done anything he oughtn’t. But I’m thinking back to what some of the chaps in the bar said about police inquiries. Is it right you was asking about anybody seen waiting around outside Windermere House on Monday evening?”

“Yes. We’ve had reports of a man who was seen standing outside the house between nine and half-past—an old chap, the witnesses agree.”

“Well, maybe we can help you there, sir. That might have been Preston. You heard some of the fellows talking about this debate they'd been plan n in a—pacifism or summat. Well, the Colonel wasn’t in on

Mondav evening, of course, and there’s a chance Preston might’ve walked round to Windermere House on the off-chance of seeing the Colonel. He wouldn’t have gone to the front door or anything of that kind, wouldn’t Bill, but I do believe the Colonel does sometimes go out for a walk after the nine o’clock news, and Bill might’ve thought there was a chance of seeing him to get things fixed up. And if that’s so. sir. then I’ll make held to say it was next door to having a policeman on the doorstep, because Bill he’d’ve noticed if there was anyone else hanging around.”

“Then the obvious thing for me to do is to find Preston and ask him if he did see anything of the kind.” rejoined Macdonald equably, and the landlord nodded.

“That’s it. sir. but you take it from me that you won’t find anything questionable about Bill Preston’s dealings. If ever a chap was straight, it’s Bill.”

“That's right,” agreed Mrs. Waiting.

SEVENTEEN

IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER NINE O'CLOCK the next morning that Macdonald arrived again at Windermere House and rang the front-door bell. The steps had not been cleaned, neither was there any sign of Mrs. Pinks. It was Madge who opened the front door; she was dressed, as usual, in a clean white coat, her dark hair brushed back smooth and hard from her face, as trim a figure as a hospital ever turned out. Her face was bloodless, her dark eves sunk in their shadowed hollows, but her stance was as steady, her voice as deliberate, as ever.

She said, "Good morning." with composed and unwavering calm, stood aside to admit Macdonald, and then led him to the drawing room, closing the door quietly when they had entered it. She stood before him in her habitual nurse's attitude: very erect, hands clasped lightly in front of her at waist level.

"You will have heard that my father has gone to see Peter in hospital? They phoned saying that pneumonia had set in. It takes these drug cases like that occasionally."

Her voice was quite emotionless, and Macdonald replied: "Yes. I had the report. They did not think that he was in any immediate danger, but that as he was fretting, it would be better for him to see his father."

She nodded. "They'll kill the pneumonia with M. and B., and then pet him back to health again. Peter's always been the same. When life goes against him he uses illness as a defence mechanism and gets away with it. I've often thought it must be rather useful to be made like that." Her dark eyes challenged Macdonald with a lustreless stare and then she went on: "I suppose you could say the same about my sleep walking. I'm sorry I gave everybody so much trouble last night. I used to do it as a child, but I'd no idea I'd started it again." She paused, but before Macdonald had time to reply, she went on calmly: "So when Anne said she heard me on the stairs on Monday night, she was probably telling the truth."

“Quite probably.” replied Macdonald, his voice as expressionless as her own. “But as you know, even better than I do, the injection given to Mrs. Farrington was not given at two o'clock in the morning. By that time she was probably beyond human aid.”

Madge stood very still, her dark eyes gazing beyond Macdonald into the distance. “I’ve tried to remember,” she said, and this time, for all the control of her voice, her throat was dry. “I don’t dream as a rule. I thought I did dream, that night. I was worrying. I suppose I went down to see . . . that it was all right. I don’t know. . . .”

Macdonald replied in a perfectly equable voice: “You remember that you told me that you went for a walk round the Inner Circle on Monday evening, between eight o’clock and nine. I thought you might be interested to know that I have corroboration of that fact. A taxi driver, who had just set down a fare, noticed you and described you.”

“That doesn't make any difference,” she snapped back. “I was home here before the nine o’clock news was finished. I was in the house when Father went out. We were all in the house, except Father. It was then it was done. You know that. I know it.” She broke off and then added tartly: “How-one does run on. The thing is an absolute obsession. It goes round and round, like a corkscrew. I didn’t mean to bore you. going on talking about it. I asked you in here to make a request. You know Mrs. Pinks lost her husband?”

“Yes.”

“He’s being buried today. I want to know if you’ll let me go to the funeral. She wants me to be there. It may sound funny to you, but she asked me to go.”

“It doesn’t sound funny at all,” answered Macdonald quietly. “You have been very kind to her. and to her husband as well. It’s perfectly natural that she should ask you to be with her.”

“And may I go?”

“Certainly. I shall do nothing to prevent you going.”

“Thank you.” Her dry voice was abrupt, almost scornful. “They set such store by funerals.” she went on. “1 often used to think that the one good thing about the blitz was that it might short-circuit one’s own funeral. Just tidy you up without any bother to anybody. But Mrs. Pinks wants me to put on my new black coat and be a credit to her; so I’ll do my best. She’s

the most generous-minded human being I've ever known." She broke off and stared at Macdonald again, as though she were trying to get him into focus, and when she spoke again it was in her usual curt voice, without the faint quiver and breathlessness of her last speech. "I suppose you came here to ask about something, not to hear me babbling. What is it this time?"

"Yes. I came here to ask you something," replied Macdonald. "You know we found some unidentified fingerprints in Mrs. Farrington's bedroom?"

"Yes. Father told me. What does it matter?"

"It matters a lot. It's necessary to find the person who made those fingerprints and determine when he, or she, was in that room, and why they were in the room."

"I've told you I don't know. I didn't order anybody to do anything in there. Mrs. Farrington may have got someone in to do something without telling me She was secretive over some things. For all I know, she may have had someone in on Monday morning when she came down to the kitchen to talk to me. If she was with me in here, she knew I wouldn't be going upstairs poking around to see what she was having done. She always imagined I spied on her. while, actually, I couldn't have cared less. But I can't see why you're fussing. Whoever was in the room has got nothing to do with what you're getting at, and you know it hasn't. Unless you're still worrying about those diamonds you said were missin'."

"They're not missing any longer. We found them in a very large tube of flake white among Peter's painting things."

"I'm glad of that . . . in a way." said Madge, and she spoke quite naturally. "You'll never be able to prove who put them there, will you? It might have been Peter or Paula, or me, or Anne—any one of us. You don't know that it was even the person who stole them who hid them in the tube."

"No. That's quite true," replied Macdonald. "Perhaps Paula herself will have something to say about it. She has been asking to see me, hasn't she?"

"Yes. I suppose Maddox told you that. I knew Maddox in hospital once. She's a good nurse. She agreed with me that it was better for Paula not to see you yesterday. The kid doesn't know what she's saying. She's nearly frantic about Peter. When you see her, tell her it's all right. She's a

mean little beast in some ways, but the sight of her now gets me down. She’s only a kid.”

Macdonald had been listening to the undertones of Madge’s voice as much as to what she said. Something had happened to her. Her rigid self-control was slipping at last, and she tended to talk as a patient recovering from an anaesthetic talks—freely but not quite reasonably.

“I know she’s only a youngster,” rejoined Macdonald. “You needn’t worry about her; I shan’t give too much heed to what she says, because she’s in no state to give evidence. Now, about this funeral. How are you going to the cemetery? Do you want a taxi?”

“No. I never take taxis. I can’t afford them. I shall take a bus to Camden Town and then a trolley-bus out to Highgate. I’m not going with Mrs. Pinks. To follow a hearse would be about the last straw.”

“I shouldn’t go by bus if I were you.” said Macdonald. “You're tired and on edge. I’ll get you a taxi, and you can take it quietly.”

She cried out at him: “Oh, for God’s sake, leave me alone. Let me do this thing by myself. I haven’t asked you for much, have I? Only to go to a funeral. Can’t you let me do that by myself?”

“I haven’t said you couldn’t go by yourself,” replied Macdonald patiently. “I only said it wasn’t sensible to go by bus. You’re so tired you hardly know what you’re doing or saving, and you’re going to stand by an open graveside while the coffin is lowered and the words of committal spoken, and it's not going to be easy. You've often told other people to have a little common sense, haven’t you? Take your own advice now.”

His quiet voice brought the tears to her eyes, but she fought them back. “You know, don’t you?” she asked desperately.

“I know you want to go to that funeral,” he replied. “Go and get it over. Leave the talking till afterwards.”

A half-smile lighted the desolation of her eyes. “Mrs. Pinks says you’re too much like a human being to be a cop.”

“It’s possible to be both.” replied Macdonald. “Now get this into your head. You’re going to that funeral, by yourself. as you wish to go. and nobody’s going to interfere with you. There arc some things. I won’t do—to quote what you said to me on the first occasion I met you. So put on your

best coat as requested. Have you got a nice bunch of flowers? They do like a nice bunch of flowers."

Madge gasped—a gasp that was more laughter than astonishment. "You are the most unexpected person I ever met. ... I sent a wreath—a big one. It cost all I'd got. For my own funeral, it'll be no flowers by request."

And with that she turned and fled from the room.

2

The funeral was to be at midday. At eleven o'clock Macdonald stood in the echoing entrance hall of the Northern Hospital and met Colonel Farrington, when the latter came down from seeing Peter. The old man looked grey and tired, but he did not seem surprised to see Macdonald.

"Good morning, Chief Inspector. I've just seen the boy. He's pretty sick, but they're satisfied with the progress he's making. He'll get over it all right. I've just had a few words with him and set his mind at rest. He was worrying, you know. Ah. you've got a taxi. Very kind of you, very kind indeed. This is a dreary neighbourhood, isn't it? I'm sorry for the folks who've lived all their lives in streets like this."

He got in the taxi, and when Macdonald was seated beside him, the Colonel went on: "I keep on being reminded of the days when the children all had measles or whooping cough or something. Madge generally started the epidemic, and then they all got it. It was the other way round this time: started with the youngest. Peter got in a panic and then Paula. Curious how panic is contagious. You'll have noticed that, I expect?"

"Yes. I've seen it happen," replied Macdonald.

"We're through the bad patch now," said the Colonel, "Whatever it was, they've faced it and realised how foolish they've been. I'm still a bit worried over Madge, though. She's been so quiet and steady, but all this worry and upset's taken it out of her. She ought to go away for a bit—get right away from it all. She tells me she's going to that funeral—poor Pinks. D'you think that's wise? Very tiring things, funerals."

"I don't know if it's wise, sir, but I don't think anybody has the right to prevent her going."

“Quite, quite. She’s been very good to them all. But she does need a rest. If I could get Paula away for a bit, too, it'd make things easier for Madge. There’s a cousin of mine in Sussex—a kindly, comfortable soul—she’d have Paula for a bit. But I mustn’t bother you with all these family arrangements. You’ve got enough to think about without all that. I hear you went and looked old Preston up. Amazing the trouble you fellows take. Every detail accounted for.”

“Preston was away when I called. He’d gone up to Lancashire to see his people. They live in Bolton, I’m told.”

“Bolton. That’s it. One of those industrial towns, isn’t it? I’m glad the old chap got away. He’s been talking about going there for a long time He’s a good old chap. Did you near how long he was staying?”

“Quite a short time, I believe. One of the local police went and had a word with him.”

“Ah, yes, you all work in together, don’t you? Wonderful organisation. I hope the old chap wasn’t put out. They’re very touchy about the police. You can’t make them see sense on that point. They regard it as a disgrace even to be asked to give evidence.”

“I think the majority of policemen are very considerate fellows. It’s only very occasionally you get the hectoring type They’re not encouraged by the Chief Constables of today.” “Quite right, quite right. It’s the same in the Army; much more humanity in the system today,” said the Colonel. “It’s been a privilege to see you chaps at work. Chief Inspector. I was a bit worried at first; so many implications, y’know. Might have gone wrong. All this about Madge. I’m not very happy in my mind about her going to that funeral. Very trying things, funerals. And she’s tired, you know. Not really fit for a strain of that kind. D’you think I ought to go with her? She said not, and I don’t like to insist.”

“There’s no need for you to go. sir. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Ah . . . you’ll be going yourself. That’s a great relief to me. I know you’ll see she’s all right. Ah, here we are, back in Regent’s Park again. It’s a pleasant neighbourhood. I like the trees. Always say you can’t beat London trees. I’ve lived here for thirty years. Got to know it well. Those lime trees now . . . and the hawthorns just budding. I’ve enjoyed this drive, Chief Inspector. On my soul I have. No month like March . . .”

3

It was a very small funeral cortege. Mrs. Pinks had refused to let the children go. “I don’t care what you say or what you thinks,” she declared firmly to her sister-in-law. “Funerals is no things for kids to go to. They can stop at home and see the kettle’s boiling, and ’ave a nice cuppa ready for us. ’Am I couldn’t get, but I’ve made some nice sandwiches out of that box tongue the butcher let me ’ave. Very nice and respectful ’e was. And ’Enery did love a nice bit of box tongue.”

So it was Mrs. Pinks. Miss Pinks, and Mrs. Walter Pinks who drove to the cemetery, to be joined by Madge Farrington, dressed in her new black coat and a little black hat set jauntily above her white face and haunted eyes. Together they stood by the gaunt gaping grave, in a huge cemetery where daffodils strove to nod despite the London soot. The March wind fluttered the chaplain’s white surplice and the black crepe which Mrs. Pinks had borrowed from a neighbour. and for a brief moment the passing of Henry Pinks was invested with the classic dignity of age-old formula and rite. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” The earth rattled on the lowered coffin, and Madge, dry-eyed, stood with her arm round the charwoman’s heaving shoulders and stared down into the rectangular space cut in the London clay.

Macdonald had said: “You can go to this funeral by yourself, as you wish to go.” And he kept his word. He saw Madge’s taxi arrive at the cemetery, driven by a driver with a very familiar face. He saw her go into the chapel and emerge following the coffin to the grave, but he kept his distance. Madge had once said, “There are some things I will not do,” and Macdonald was certain that whatever she purposed to do later, she would not mar the decorum of Henry Pinks’ moment of dignity. She had been well trained in decorum, for whatever the late Mrs. Farrington had been, she had certainly been a lady, and Madge had been brought up by Mrs. Farrington.

Concealed near the gatehouse of the cemetery after the funeral was over, Macdonald heard Mrs. Pinks beg Madge to come back to join the party in tea and sandwiches.

“No, I won’t come back, Mrs. Pinks, dear; Father will be wanting me at home.” said Madge. “It all went off beautifully, and the flowers are lovely.”

“Not ’arf posh, that wreath you sent, duckie,” said Mrs. Pinks. “ ’Enery would’ve loved that wreath, ’e did like them lilies—but you shouldn’t ’a spent all that . . .”

The hired car drove off. with the Pinks family drying their eyes, sensibly prepared to enjoy the rare luxury of a motor drive, and Madge walked out of the cemetery gates alone. Her taxi driver, parked by the gates, called to her, “Taxi, miss, drive you home again?” but she did not turn her head. Macdonald nodded to the man as he passed the taxi, and then followed Madge. He had his own guess as to what she would do. She walked steadily along to the main road and made her way deliberately through the crowd glancing neither to left nor right, and certainly never looking behind her. At Highgate Tube Station she turned in to the booking hall and took a ticket to Goodge Street, still calm and unhurried. Macdonald was only a few steps behind her on the escalator. When she reached the platform she turned towards the rear and stood facing the tunnel whence the train would emerge. She stood perfectly still, close to the edge of the platform, and from far away came the sound of the approaching train. The sound increased in intensity, from a rumble to a muffled roar, and then in an earsplitting crescendo the train emerged from the tunnel.

It was then that Macdonald caught Madge, picking her up as he would have lifted a child, swinging her to the back of the platform just as she tried to fling herself under the train. He saw the face of the driver in the cab. heard the screech of the brakes which drowned Madge’s scream as he heaved her back into safety, and then felt the sting of her hand as she slapped his face like a child in a fury.

“Let me go,” she shrieked at him. “Let me go. I killed her. You know I killed her. What do you want to hang me for? Can’t I end it my own way? Let me go!”

Macdonald caught her hands and held them down, .shaking the rigid body. “You didn’t kill her, and I know you didn’t kill her. Nobody’s going to hang you, because you didn't do it. You’ve done your best, but .it’s no good. You can’t settle things like this. Now' be quiet, and for goodness’ sake show’ a little common sense. I’m very sorry, but you can’t do things like that.”

She flopped suddenly, the crazy energy of her struggle collapsing into limp inertia. Macdonald lifted her onto a seat against the wall as a tube

attendant came up.

“I saw you catch her. They’re always doing it. Makes me mad. Never think of the driver, do they?”

“No. I don’t think they do,” agreed Macdonald. “All right. I’m a C.I.D. man. I’ll see to this.”

“Rather you than me. Gives me the proper pip, they do,” said the other disgustedly. “Think about the driver, that’s what I say.”

4

It was about half an hour later that Macdonald reached Windermere House again and Reeves admitted him into the silent hall. One glance at Reeves’ face was enough to warn Macdonald of what was coming.

“He shot himself,” said Reeves. “I suppose I could have stopped him, but I let him out of sight for ten seconds and he didn’t waste them. If anybody’s to blame, blame me.”

“Call it fifty-fifty,” said Macdonald dryly. “I should have hated to see him hanged, for all that he murdered his wife quite deliberately. What happened?”

He was quite cheerful and normal when you brought him back. Asked me if I’d join him in a cup of tea for elevenses, and down we went to the kitchen. He filled the kettle and told me where the tea was, and while we were waiting for the kettle to boil he said: 'By Jove, I forgot to clean my shoes this morning. Never go out without cleaning my shoes.’ He got a box out of the kitchen cupboard with shoebrushes and whatnots in it and started polishing his shoes. He asked me to make the tea when the kettle boiled, and I’d just got hold of the kettle when he shot himself. He’d hidden his gun under the dusters in the boot box. His confession was in a big envelope sticking out of his jacket pocket—here it is. T’s crossed and I’s dotted. And a vote of thanks to you and me for being so considerate. That’s a new one on me, Chief.”

“On me. too,” said Macdonald. “It beats me how a man like that could screw himself up to murder.”

“He’d got a limited mind,” said Reeves slowly. “He could be driven so far and no farther, and the old lady just drove him too far when she began to bully Madge back into being a mental case.”

Macdonald nodded. “Yes. You’re quite right. He saw what was happening and he could only think of one way out of it. And his chief mistake was in giving old Dr. Baring too large a whisky, and he probably did that out of sheer kindheartedness!”

EIGHTEEN

"A CURIOUS CASE," observed the Assistant Commissioner when Chief Inspector Macdonald made his report on the Farrington case.

"And an unexpectedly interesting one, sir." rejoined Macdonald. "To my mind, there was never any doubt at all as to who was responsible for Mrs. Farrington's death, but the 'build-up.' the accumulation of detail concerning human behaviour, made it much more interesting than many of the more spectacular cases we've had."

The A.C. pushed his chair back to a more comfortable angle after a glance at the clock. "I've got half an hour, or if I haven't I propose to take it," he said; "so lay on. I find your details interesting, Macdonald, and I'm always game for an argument."

"I'm afraid there's not much room for argument, sir," responded Macdonald, a smile lighting his eyes. "Here was the setup, as I saw it through the evidence of those who lived or worked in that house: first Madge, then the charwoman, then Paula, then Anne Strange and her husband. It was these who provided the evidence which they sought, desperately, to conceal."

"You think they guessed?" asked the A.C.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Madge knew all the time. Paula tumbled to it. Mrs. Pinks knew. Anne Strange guessed. Tony Strange tried to persuade himself —and me—otherwise, but he knew. The other married couple—the Duncans—were negligible, and Peter avoided trouble by an overdose of dope." He paused and took a cigarette from the case the A.C. held out to him.

"Deceased must have been a deplorable woman," went on Macdonald. "She was selfish to an abnormal degree; she was possessive, dominating, and tyrannical. And mean with it. The old man must have had some sort of inkling of all this for years, but he was a peace-loving old chap. He made the best of her, until the worst obtruded itself so clearly that he felt he'd got to put a stop to it, not for his own sake, but for the children's. He listed his

reasons perfectly clearly in the document he left for us, beginning with Madge. Madge was his first-born child, the daughter of his first wife. Farrington married again chiefly in order to get a home and a mother for Madge. He was a kindly, simple, affectionate man, prepared to offer complete devotion to the woman whom he married. He never dreamt of criticising her, and she dominated him completely, so that he accepted her at her own estimate, as a self-sacrificing wife and mother to whom duty meant everything and self nothing. In my own view, this state of affairs might have gone on all their lives but for the upheaval of the war. Between 1940 and 1945, Edward Farrington was away from home, away from the domination of his wife, and he began to look at life from another angle. In other words, he began to think."

The A.C. nodded. "You obviously found him an interesting study. Macdonald."

"I did, sir; very interesting. He was a man with a strong sense of duty, also a sense of detail, but he was, as Reeves observed, very limited. He could see so far and no farther. Well, when he was demobilised and came back to live with his wife and family at Windermere House, the old comfortable days had gone—the days of a cook and three good maids. Madge was keeping house. The twins, whom he still thought of as school children, had developed into queer modern eccentrics, living a life of their own in the attics. Tony brought his wife to live at Windermere House, and Joyce brought her husband, and throughout the house, from kitchen to attics, tension grew. Everyone was unhappy—save Muriel. Everyone was embittered—save Muriel. She was the centre and focus point of discontent, and she was dominating Madge by the implied threat of proving that Madge was of unsound mind—bats, crackers, as Mrs. Pinks put it."

The A.C. moved irritably. "I see what you're driving at. Macdonald, but damn it. the thing's unreasonable. It's plain stupid. Madge was a very competent woman. She could have walked out, couldn't she?"

"Certainly she could," rejoined Macdonald; "but what I am trying to do is to reconstruct the situation from Farrington's point of view. You say it was plain stupid. So was he, if you like to use those words. I prefer the word simple. Reeves prefers the word limited. They amount to very much the same thing."

"Have it your own way," said the A.C., "but is Madge stupid?"

“No. sir. she isn’t stupid, but she had been dominated and made wretched as a child, and she had had a very severe nervous breakdown. Madge resembles her father inasmuch as she also is limited in certain respects, particularly in her affections. She adored her father. She knew that if she did leave home her father would have a particularly poor time. It was improbable that any charwoman would put up with Mrs. Farrington for very long, and Madge foresaw that her father, when she left home, would gradually be forced into the role of head cook and bottle washer. Nevertheless, Madge had made up her mind to go. She had got a job, and she was going to America as nurse-companion. And that brings us to the state of affairs in the Farrington household on the Monday morning, when Mrs. Farrington came down to see Madge in the kitchen to ask for a dinner party for eight with all the family silver and glass, four courses, soup, fish, bird, and sweet—all to be cooked and served by Madge.”

The Assistant Commissioner chuckled. “Give me all the details, I enjoy the details,” he murmured.

“That projected dinner party proved to be the final detail, the last straw,” said Macdonald meditatively. Colonel Farrington had been considering things for a long time. He saw Peter, who had been forced into a job which he loathed and for which he was totally unfitted, going to the bad steadily. He saw Paula lying and cheating to help her twin. He saw Anne Strange being discredited to her husband and growing increasingly bitter. He saw Philip Duncan in a financial mess. And above all, he saw Madge being jockeyed into the position of a mental defective. Tony Strange told the exact truth about the journal his mother kept, listing Madge’s departures from the normal. The book existed all right, and the Colonel knew all about it. He destroyed it, of course. He had read every word. To his simple mind, it was a dangerous document, it might cause Madge to be certified as insane. That was too much for the Colonel. Thinking the matter out carefully, he thought that if Muriel passed out painlessly —her heart was very weak, after all—he might help his demoralised family back to normal happiness. We have his own word for it that he had been considering this for some time. Now, before we get to the method he thought out, just consider the scene in the kitchen that Monday morning—when the Colonel stood outside the door and listened in to the conversation. He knew' that Madge had got this American job and he was wholeheartedly delighted for her sake. He heard Mrs. Farrington say, ‘But, Madge, it’s

impossible. The doctors would never sign the necessary papers . . . you would never be allowed to go to America.' And the Colonel said to himself, 'This thing has got to stop and I am going to stop it.' "

2

"Now, with regard to the method," went on Macdonald. "The Colonel, like many men of his type, took a vague interest in diseases and medical matters. He talked to Mrs. Pinks and knew about her husband's diabetes. He talked to Madge and learnt about the properties of insulin and its use in inducing a state of coma for nerve cases. He doubtless talked to Baring, who had suggested a course of inoculation for Mrs. Farrington's colds. This last point is particularly interesting, because it shows a vein of real cunning in the old man's make-up. Every time he mentioned those inoculations to me he spoke of the idea with extreme reprobation. But Baring had actually shown the Colonel himself how to give an injection. Madge knew this, though nothing would have induced her to tell me so until after her father's death. Muriel was so sensitive to pain, she felt it less if her husband gave the injection."

"I see," said the A.C. "Did you think that one out for yourself. Macdonald?"

"It seemed to me quite a possibility," replied Macdonald, "but I will enlarge on that idea later. At the moment I want to tell you about the Colonel's ideas, which showed careful forethought. He had decided on insulin as his medium, knowing it would bring about a painless death. He knew that he could obtain this substance from Dr. Baring's medical case, and he knew also that Baring, who was old and shaky, was also forgetful and unobservant. When Colonel Farrington made up his mind to put his carefully prepared plan into operation on the Monday, he reviewed every circumstance and contingency, as a soldier should before committing himself to any strategy. There was one extraneous circumstance which he thought he might use to his own advantage On the Monday morning, between the time that Mrs. Pinks had finished cleaning the bedroom and the time the Colonel went downstairs to listen in at the kitchen door, he had had

his Darts Club friend, old Bill Preston, in the house to examine the fastenings on the bedroom window', with a view to putting a burglarproof catch on the window. Now, the Colonel knew all about fingerprints. If things went wrong, as they might do. it occurred to him that it might be useful to have some unidentifiable fingerprints in the room. He was much too ignorant of police investigations to imagine that we should ever track down his Darts Club acquaintances."

“Just one query here." put in the A.C. “At what stage in the inquiry did you come to the conclusion that you couldn’t afford to believe anything the old man said?"

“Pretty early on." said Macdonald. “After I had talked to Madge, I was fairly certain that Colonel Farrington had given his wife the insulin, but I also believed that he would stick to the truth as far as he was able. He had plenty of common sense and realised how much wiser it was to stick to facts as far as possible. For my part, it was a matter of sorting out what was possible to corroborate and what wasn’t: without corroboration. I couldn't afford to believe a word he said. He gave me a most careful and detailed description of his wife’s movements on the Monday morning, all calculated to fit in with his own scheme, but since I had already come to the conclusion that he must have given the insulin injection himself, his description was only of interest to me in the academic sense—the way in which it revealed his own careful but limited mind.”

“It’s a fascinating story," observed the A.C. “As you say. the old chap must have done some careful thinking."

Macdonald nodded. “Perfectly true." he replied. “Now, as to the actual events. By persistent telephoning, the Colonel at length got Dr. Baring to the house on Monday evening and doubtless primed him with a long story of Muriel’s fainting fits and heart pains, to prepare the ground for the eventual death. Baring, between old age. flu. quinine, and whisky, was probably in no state to tell a sound heart from a bad one When he had seen the patient, the Colonel took him to the drawing room and. being genuinely sorry for the doctor's obvious exhaustion, gave him a double whisky. I think this was the factor that shipwrecked the scheme. It was true that Baring forgot his medical case—or assumed that Farrington had put it in the car: this was according to plan, but Baring was now as near drunk as makes no difference. He probably got muddled between the brake and the accelerator

and charged a lamp standard on his homeward way. Farrington, having given his wife some hot milk, read to her or a little and said he would then give her her hypodermic noculation according to the doctor’s orders. He did so, using the insulin he found in Baring’s case. The remainder of :he evening was spent as described by the various witnesses.”

The A.C. put a word in here: “Aren’t you surprised that Farrington asked Madge in to see her mother that evening, Macdonald?”

“No, sir. That was his careful mind again. You must remember that he counted on Dr. Baring coming in the morning. He wanted to be able to say, with corroboration, ‘I was worried about her last night.’ It was one of those little details which appeal to the simple mind. He knew quite well that Madge didn’t take Mrs. Farrington’s ailments seriously, and Madge was already much too tired and upset to start icing alarmist that evening. The only other event of the night was Paula’s doing. Paula, who had managed to possess herself of the key of the safe when she went to ask for the key of the glass cupboard, did go into her mother’s bedroom and did take some of her diamonds from the safe, hoping to sell them for Peter’s benefit. And Paula realised that her mother was no longer breathing normally—which perhaps accounts for the state she got into afterwards, when Scott refused to sign a death certificate. Paula knew that to have stolen the diamonds from Mrs. Farrington’s room that night put both her and Peter in a very unpleasant position.”

3

“But why were you so certain that Farrington himself did the job?” inquired the A.C. “There was motive enough among the other members of the household, particularly in Madge’s case.”

“Yes. sir. I quite agree. There was motive. One has to remember that Mrs. Farrington had the money, and at her death the children—all save Madge—stood to profit. They could have acquired the means, for old Baring was not too careful over that medical case of his, but I did not believe they could have done it. Consider it carefully. It meant giving a hypodermic injection without waking the patient. Now it might conceivably be possible in the case of a child, for young children sleep very soundly. A

child can sleep when a bomb explodes across the way, but elderly people do not sleep like that. In order to have given a hypodermic injection to Mrs. Farrington as she slept, it was necessary to go right up to her bed, to draw back the bedclothes so as to bare the arm. to get a grip on that arm, and finally to drive the needle home and keep it in place while the plunger was pressed down and the liquid forced in. It is true that Mrs. Farrington had had a mild barbiturate, but I did not believe, and I utterly refuse to believe, that the thing could have been done without waking her."

"Yes. I see your point. You're probably right," agreed the A.C., "but was it essential not to wake her? Couldn't Madge have said it was doctor's orders?"

"Not if you realise the attitude of the one woman to the other, sir. Mrs. Farrington knew perfectly well that Madge hated her and that she had every reason to hate her. Madge had threatened her that morning. If Mrs. Farrington had woken up and found Madge beside her with a hypodermic. Mrs. Farrington would have created a scene which the whole house would have heard. Mrs. Farrington was afraid of Madge. When Mrs. Pinks plucked up her courage and told me how Mrs. Farrington both hated and feared Madge, she proved conclusively to my mind that Madge could never have done it. though I was certain of it before. And if not Madge, who else could have? Peter or Paula? Anne Strange? Joyce Duncan, who avoided her mother at all costs? It didn't make sense, because Mrs. Farrington would have made a scene. Insulin doesn't put a patient under at once. She would have had plenty of time and energy to 'create,' as they say."

"Yes—well, I suppose you were right." said the A.C. "You got to know the household. Yes, you had a point there all right. Macdonald."

"Then there was the time element," said Macdonald. "The probability was that the injection was given between eight-thirty and ten o'clock. Colonel Farrington was with his wife until after the nine o'clock news. He then went upstairs to ask Anne to come down to sit in the drawing room. Mrs. Farrington was then alone, and Madge could have had three or four minutes to do the job, but my objection still held: Mrs. Farrington would have made a scene which would have brought her husband and Anne Strange running to her room. Colonel Farrington then went out, and Anne Strange sat in the drawing room. Could she have done it? Would Mrs. Farrington have gone quietly to sleep again after Anne —who hated her—

had used a hypodermic on her? No. It just didn't make sense. It was obviously the one person in the house whom she trusted—namely, her husband."

The A.C. nodded. "I'm surprised the old boy didn't shoot himself straight away, though. You say he was a decent old chap in most ways."

"Colonel Farrington's motive throughout was to help his children, but above all to help Madge. Madge got nothing under Mrs. Farrington's will. If he could have inherited, he could have saved a bit for her out of income. When he planned his scheme it must have looked pretty safe. He counted on Baring .coming and signing a death certificate without hesitation."

"But when Scott refused a certificate, he must have realised the game was up."

"A more intelligent and better-informed man would have realised it, but the Colonel went on hoping. To do him justice, I think he wanted to see how the case would go before he threw up the sponge. I don't think he feared anything for himself, but he did fear for Madge. A police inquiry was an unknown quantity to him: he had no experience of detectives, and he was afraid at first that Madge might be accused. He actually put on record his gratitude to Reeves and myself for being so unbiased and fair in our investigation. There was one set of circumstances which he thought gave him a chance to win through. He knew that Preston's fingerprints were on the window ledges in the bedroom. He knew that Preston had waited outside the house on Monday evening—though the Colonel did not see him that evening. In his simple way Farrington said to himself: 'These chaps are very thorough. They'll find the fingerprints, they'll hear of a loiterer outside; Muriel's diamonds have disappeared. The burglar must have been responsible for the murder.' He was as simple as that."

"And his children realised he must have done it?"

"I think so. Madge, of course, would have argued exactly as I did. She would have known it was impossible for anybody else to have given Mrs. Farrington that injection. Rather than see him accused, Madge tried to take the guilt on her own shoulders and jump under a tube train to end the whole thing. I remember saying to her as I caught her back from the train, 'You can't do things like that.' I felt several times that I should have liked to say the same thing to her father— you can't settle things like that."

The A.C. nodded. “Yes,” he said slowly. “I think 1 see your other point. He was a very simple man. He could only see one step at a time.”

“There was a lot that was honestly kind and unselfish in him,” said Macdonald; “but he did the one thing which no man may do—took the law into his own hands without any realisation of the forces which move behind the law. He found that out. But even so, I shall always remember him with some degree of liking. He was very devoted to Madge.”

“And what will Madge do now?”

“Go to America. The offer still holds, I hear. So it’s back as they were, so to speak, before Mrs. Farrington came down to the kitchen to order dinner for eight.”

A grim little smile curled round the A.C.’s firm mouth.

“Settled her own hash, eh, Macdonald?”

The Chief Inspector nodded. “That’s about it,” he agreed.